

A vintage-style book cover illustration. On the left, a woman in a white nurse's uniform and cap looks down with a concerned expression at a man on the right. The man is sitting, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers, with his head buried in his hands in a gesture of despair or shame. The background is a solid yellowish-gold color.

DOCTOR IN DISGRACE

2'6

SHAUNA MARLOWE

DOCTOR IN DISGRACE

by
Shauna Marlowe

A CALVERT ROMANCE

Companion to this Volume —

SCANDAL AND SISTER NIGHTINGALE

by

VAL STRICKLAND

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CHAPTER I

"Nurse! Mrs. Amos is ringing. Didn't you hear her?"

Sister Falcon stopped Tess Walden on her way into the women's ward. She spoke with an acid sharpness, which was her usual manner.

"I heard her, but I'm busy with Mrs. Gillen," Tess said. "She's in pain, and really needs attention."

"Has Mrs. Amos called you much tonight?"

"Only about a dozen times," Tess laughed. "She hasn't really needed me at all."

"So that's it, is it? A private room, wife of a Board member, so she thinks she's entitled to a nurse in attendance the whole time."

"I really shouldn't neglect Mrs. Gillen," Tess said. "After the operation she had . . ."

"Certainly not! Carry on with what you're doing, and I'll go to Mrs. Amos. If she's just playing up, I'll give her a talking to that she won't forget."

Patients who wanted nurses always waiting on them seemed to choose the middle of the night to make their most annoying demands. It was one of the drawbacks to night duty. There was usually someone who felt neglected unless a nurse was hovering around the bed all night. If they were not made to behave more reasonably, they disturbed other patients. A sister who could not put a stop to it soon had her entire ward restless and wakeful.

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Mrs. Amos was an important woman in this mining town, but if anyone could silence her it would be Sister Falcon. Sister Falcon was no respecter of persons.

So Tess hurried to Mrs. Gillen. She had already done what she could to make Mrs. Gillen comfortable. She could not tell how much pain was to be expected after a spinal operation, but she was alarmed when she reached the bed and saw Mrs. Gillen's face. The pain was no longer localised as it had been earlier. It was everywhere, Mrs. Gillen said, first in one place, then in another.

This was beyond a nurse. The operation had been unusual, one for which Tess's past experience was no guide. She tried everything she knew short of a sedative, but dared not give that without orders from the doctor. All she could do was find Sister Falcon and tell her.

"I'll have a look at her," the sister said.

On the way to Mrs. Gillen's bed, Tess asked, "How's Lady Amos?"

"Furious. Not sick enough to need nursing, but strong enough to feel outraged when she's told to behave herself."

They reached the bed, and the sister needed only one glance at Mrs. Gillen.

"She's Dr. Mallings's patient. It's lucky he's here tonight."

As soon as Sister Falcon went to call Dr. Mallings, Mrs. Amos began to demand attention again. Even Sister Falcon's acid tongue was not able to convince her that she had to co-operate with the staff when she was in hospital.

Tess glanced at Mrs. Gillen. There was nothing she could do at that moment, so she ran to the private room where Mrs. Amos lay in splendid isolation.

"That's more like it," Mrs. Amos said. "When I ring for a nurse, I expect her to come at once."

"It isn't always possible," Tess told her. "We have other patients who need attention."

"Why didn't you come when I rang before?" Mrs. Amos asked. "I don't like Sister Falcon. I don't want her inside this room again."

"You can't always have just the nurse you want," Tess said. "What did you call me for?"

"This jug of water has been here for two hours, and it's luke-warm. I like a drink of ice-cold water when I wake up at night."

"I'll get an ice-block for it."

"Just a minute," Mrs. Amos said as Tess was leaving the room. "You didn't tell me why you failed to come the last time I wanted you."

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"Really, Mrs. Amos, you've no right to ask. If you've any complaints about me, tell Sister Falcon or Matron."

"Have you got something to hide? Were you having a sleep when you should have been working?"

"I was attending to a patient who's in great pain, if you must know. Mrs. Gillen, in case you know her."

"I do not know her. I hope she's comfortable now, not keeping you away from your duties the whole night."

"You ought to go to sleep, Mrs. Amos," Tess said. "We're likely to be very busy with Mrs. Gillen. Sister is calling Dr. Mallings to her."

Tess got out of the room before Mrs. Amos could say anything more. It was all right for Sister Falcon to scold a patient of Mrs. Amos' standing, but Tess was afraid that if she started expressing her feeling toward this woman, she would say something that would provide real grounds for complaint.

She went to the refrigerator for the ice-blocks. The sister was still busy on the telephone. Tess got the ice, put two of the cubes in a glass, and started toward the private room.

"I can't get the doctor anywhere," Sister Falcon said, putting down the telephone. "He's not in his office, nor in his quarters. See if you can find him, Nurse. Try the other wards, and anywhere else he might be. I want to stay near Mrs. Gillen."

"I'll put this ice in Mrs. Amos' water-jug on the way," Tess said. "She insists on iced water in the middle of the night."

In so small a hospital there was no switchboard attendant late at night. Calls to the hospital came direct to Sister Falcon or Matron, depending on who was on duty. So Tess asked the nurses in the other wards if they had seen Dr. Mallings. None had seen him for an hour. Tess went to the operating theatre, thinking he might be checking the condition of the surgical instruments. He was not there.

All she was able to learn was from a wardman who had answered an insistent ringing of the bell at the hospital entrance and had found a woman at the unattended desk. She wanted to see Dr. Mallings, but would not go to his office. The wardman had told Dr. Mallings, and had gone on with his own duties.

"He's somewhere in the hospital," Sister Falcon snapped when Tess told her. "There's no one at all in the doctor's quarters."

"I didn't look in the dispensary. Could he be there?"

"You'd better try it. I'm worried about Gillen, and there's not a thing I can do without the doctor's orders."

Dr. Mallings was not in the dispensary.

Mrs. Gillen appeared to be in serious danger when Tess came to her bed again. Her colour was appalling and her pulse was erratic. Her temperature was below normal rather than

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above. It was a case that defied nursing skill, that was completely outside a nurse's knowledge.

"There's Mrs. Amos again," Sister Falcon said with venom. "She's been ringing that bell every few minutes, but I can't leave a really sick patient for . . ."

"I'll see if I can keep her quiet for a little while. She'll have all the patients awake if she goes on like that."

It was enraging. Mrs. Amos was recovering from a minor accident. She had to stay in bed and needed a small amount of nursing attention, but she was suffering no discomfort, and was not really ill. Almost any other woman, in the circumstances, would have remained at home and arranged for someone in the family to give her the attention she needed; but Mrs. Amos was wife of a member of the Hospital Board. She not only insisted on a private room at the hospital, but seem determined not to sleep at all during the night, but to demand constant attention.

"You should be asleep, Mrs. Amos!" Tess scolded as she entered the room.

"Where have you been?" Mrs. Amos raged. "I might as well be marooned on a desert island for all the notice you nurses take of me. I'll have something to say to my husband tomorrow, and some heads will topple in this place. The very idea; You're paid to look after patients, and I've been ringing this bell for an hour before you came to see what was wrong."

"I've had to hunt all over the hospital for the doctor for Mrs. Gillen," Tess told her. "When there's an emergency, other things have to take second place."

"An emergency, you say?"

"That's how it looks to Sister Falcon. What can I get you?"

"I want another pillow. This one's all lumpy."

"I'll get it, and then I want you to go to sleep. You've no reason at all for staying awake and making calls on us in the middle of the night."

Tess went to the cupboard, got another pillow, put it into a clean pillow-slip and took it to Mrs. Amos.

Mrs. Amos said, "M-m-m! Yes, that's better. Well, what does the doctor say about this famous emergency that kept you from attending me?"

"We haven't been able to locate him yet," Tess said. "Now I'm going to turn out your light. Sister will be very cross if you don't go to sleep at once."

When Tess returned to Mrs. Gillen's bed, the patient was finding it hard to breathe. Sister Falcon had a frightened look, something Tess had never before seen on her face.

"There's nothing I can do," she said. "If only — listen! Did you hear a car at the entrance?"

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"Yes. Shall I go and see . . .?"

"Hurry! If it was Dr. Malling — but he isn't suppose to leave without . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished, and Tess literally ran toward the entrance. She met Dr. Malling in the corridor, going to his office.

His face was grim, but there was a light in his eyes that Tess had seen only when he had accomplished a particularly delicate operation. He stopped still when he saw her.

"What is it, Nurse? Did something go wrong while I was out?"

"Mrs. Gillen. We're — you'd better come at once."

He went ahead of Tess, his long strides taking him faster than she could run. He went to Mrs. Gillen's bed, nodded to the sister, glanced once at the patient and turned on his heel.

"An injection! I'll be back at once."

He came with the hypodermic syringe ready. He gave the injection, and Mrs. Gillen's breathing became easier, her pulse more regular.

"Prepare the theatre, Nurse. You'll have to give the anaesthetic, Sister. There isn't a minute to spare."

Dr. Malling was a dynamo of power. Though only thirty-five, he was superintendent of this public hospital, and enjoyed the unflinching loyalty of every member of the staff. Even Dr. Brown, fifteen years older than Dr. Malling, worked under him with no sign of resentment.

Whatever may have gone wrong with the Gillen case, it was clear that Dr. Malling knew at once what it was. He came to the operating theatre a few minutes after Tess got there. He commenced to scrub his hands. He asked Tess a few questions about Mrs. Gillen's symptoms while they prepared, but he said nothing about his own absence.

Sister Falcon came in and prepared to administer the anaesthetic. She said nothing. Two wardsmen brought in Mrs. Gillen, who was more conscious now, and able to see what was occurring.

"I'll have to operate again," the doctor told her. "You'll be all right when you come out of it this time."

Tess had not assisted at the first operation. She did not know how extensive it was, or its nature. She knew only what was on the patient's card, which indicated it was an operation on the spine. Nor was she able to see what Dr. Malling was doing now.

He re-opened the small incision which had not yet healed on Mrs. Gillen's back. He removed a part of a vertebra, which had not yet knitted, exposing the spinal cord itself. Then he put on

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glasses with powerful magnifying lenses, and called for special instruments which Tess had seen no other doctor use. The operation itself was so minute and intricate that Tess could get no idea what the doctor was doing.

It was not prolonged, but the closing of the wound took time, as did a most elaborate series of precautions to insure that Mrs. Gillen's back would remain completely rigid for a few days.

• Dr. Malling himself supervised the transfer of the patient to her bed. Then, he went with the sister and Nurse Walden to the day-room for coffee.

"Will she be all right?" Sister Falcon asked.

"Yes, but it was touch-and-go. I don't think she'd have lasted another five minutes without that injection."

He sipped his coffee thoughtfully. Tess thought of his absence, of the full hour during which a life was so nearly lost, and wondered why Dr. Malling made no reference to it, gave no explanation.

"One learns," he said after a moment. "I found the one little thing that hasn't been mentioned by other surgeons who do this type of operation, a simple thing that will prevent the nerves getting displaced again."

He was talking to himself rather than to them. He was thinking of nothing except the operation, and a small improvement in method that he thought might save more lives. He did not appear to be thinking at all of the hour-long search of the hospital in a vain effort to bring him to Mrs. Gillen sooner.

After he left them and went to his office, Tess and the sister were completely silent for a time. Tess felt baffled and dejected, and she knew that Sister Falcon was even more so. It was something they did not wish to mention, something they would rather not think about.

After a while, Sister Falcon said, "Mrs. Amos must have gone to sleep at last."

"I told her you'd be annoyed if she didn't."

It was an attempt to take their minds away from what they had been thinking, but it failed. The facts were too glaring, and too uncompromising. Dr. Malling was superintendent of the hospital. He had two doctors under him. It was his duty to see that at least one doctor was available instantly at any hour, and tonight he himself had undertaken to be in attendance. The other two doctors were absent. He knew they were absent. And yet, in the face of that, he had left the hospital without telling the sister in charge, giving her no means of communicating with him.

On his own statement, his absence came within a hair's breadth of causing the death of a patient.

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Mrs. Gillen would live. No real harm had been done, and only Tess and the sister knew how close it had been. No one else on the staff knew that Dr. Malling had been away from the hospital. When a silence fell between them again, they exchanged glances which said more than words. It was an exchange of a promise to say nothing about it.

Part of a nurse's code forbids her to discuss the professional capacities of the doctors under whom she works, or their professional characters. Nurses do discuss the doctors among themselves, of course. No system of rules can prevent it. The doctor, and the treatment he prescribes, or the surgery he performs, are the central focus of their work. They would be less than human if they did not talk about their work among themselves. Outside the hospital, outside the actual staff, however, a sincere nurse avoids saying anything that shows her opinion on such matters.

In this case, a doctor whom all the staff liked and admired and trusted had done something that would make his professional character look very bad if it were generally known. There was no need for it to be talked about. That exchange of glances meant that it would not be talked about, even in the hospital itself. Both Tess and the sister understood the other's glance as a pledge that needed no words to confirm it.

Tess was very distressed when she went off duty next morning, despite the fact that Mrs. Gillen would certainly recover. The futile search for the doctor while the patient became rapidly worse, the certainty that the patient was about to die, the last-minute arrival of the doctor who should have been there all the time, followed by the strain of the operation—all this had produced a sense of disaster, of impending tragedy, greater than she had experienced in the presence of actual death. Her emotions had built up, she felt the pressure of them in her breast.

This habit of her emotions building up to breaking-point was not new. It happened when there was little stress to explain it, as a result of the small annoyances and worries of her work. Tess could control it and suppress it, and appear calm for a time, but her room-mate knew how passionately the flood of emotions flowed when release became imperative. Jane had been alarmed when they first became close friends, for it was on Jane that Tess released her accumulated emotions. Now, however — for the past year, in fact — John Dobbie had received the flood of emotions. He had been flattered by it, not alarmed.

By the time Tess awakened that afternoon, she had reached the point when she simply had to see John Dobbie. She assumed, and he did, too, that it was love that forced Tess to call him on the telephone at times and insist on meeting him.

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He drove into town from the mine and took Tess to a pretty picnic spot beside the river. He asked her on the way if something had upset her, but she could not tell him what had occurred.

"I just had to see you," she said. "It doesn't mean that I'm upset."

"I'm supposed to be working. It's lucky the old man is manager of the mine."

"You think I'm being silly, don't you?"

"Not silly, Tess. When you're on night duty, this is about the only time we can meet."

They left the car, and Tess let go the flood as soon as John's arms were around her. She overwhelmed him with kisses. She cried as she clung tightly to him, kissing him frantically, demanding his kisses in return. Her face was wet with tears, but there was no real sorrow behind them. John Dobbie had learned months ago that Tess's tears meant nothing. They meant only that a force of emotion had become bottled up in her heart somehow, and were finding expression in his arms.

Her feelings spent themselves in kisses and tears, and they sat on the grass, only their shoulders touching.

"I believe one of your patients had a close call last night," John said. "Ready to pass out at one stage, wasn't she?"

"Which patient?"

"Oh, you don't have to be afraid of talking out of school. Dad's on the Hospital Board, you know."

"Patients take bad turns," Tess said. "Other patients in the ward usually think it's worse than it is."

"Mrs. Gillen. More than just a bad turn, wasn't it?"

"Yes, hers was worse than that. That was because of the operation she'd just had; but she'll be all right."

While she said it, Tess tried to think how John could have learned of the incident. There had been no other nurses there, though Tess had visited each ward asking for the whereabouts of the doctor. One of the others may have let something slip, or one of the wardsmen.

"And you thought she was going to die," John stated flatly.

"If I did, it doesn't mean much. A nurse's opinion, you know . . ."

He reached for her hand and held it tight.

"All right," he said. "If the rules don't let you talk, even to me, then I'll tell you. Something went wrong with Mrs. Gillen's operation, and she was practically dying, and you couldn't find a doctor anywhere in the place. It was so close—"

"How did you get hold of a story like that?" Tess interrupted.

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"From Amos, of course. He told Dad. He got it from his wife, and she reckons she got it from you."

"She made most of it up," Tess said. "I didn't tell her that."

Tess was in a terrible position. She had told Mrs. Amos she was away from the ward looking for the doctor. She also had told her that Mrs. Gillen was in a dangerous condition. She had certainly not told her there was no doctor in the hospital.

"Shall I tell Dad it's a pack of lies?"

"I won't discuss these things," Tess said. "I wouldn't have told Mrs. Amos anything, only she was ringing her bell every five minutes, demanding iced-water in the middle of the night, and a change of pillows, anything to keep me at her beck and call. She was abusing me for not being there the moment she rang, and I told her I had to leave the ward to find the doctor. Another time, I had to explain that Mrs. Gillen badly needed attention, and I couldn't leave her to answer Mrs. Amos' call when I knew Mrs. Amos didn't really need anything."

"Did you find the doctor?"

"Of course, I found him, but I've no right to tell you even this much. You know as well as I do the reason for the rule against nurses babbling about patients outside the hospital."

"Yes, of course, but . . . Look, Tess. This is different. This is something people've got a right to know."

"What is?" Tess asked. "That a patient took a bad turn, and the doctor gave emergency treatment? Or that a nurse left her ward for a little while to call the doctor because he didn't happen to be in his office? That's no business of anybody's."

"Well, Amos seems to think it's his business."

"And I'll tell you something more, now that I've said this much," Tess added. "Mrs. Amos didn't need to be in hospital. She went in to make as much trouble as possible for the staff, so far as I can see, and she's probably furious because Sister Falcon told her off, the same as she would any other patient who makes a pest of herself."

"Yes, she'd be furious, all right," John laughed. "Anyway, I don't suppose it's my business. If the Board wants to enquire about it . . ."

"The Board can ask the Matron and the Medical Superintendent. That's the proper procedure, and Mr. Amos ought to know it."

"Yeah, but he's sure to take it further than that. He intends to kick up a fuss about it."

CHAPTER II

Tess Walden knew the peril in which she placed herself by letting go such a flood of emotion while she was in the arms of a young man. The peril was real because she only did it when her pent-up passions were beyond control and an outlet was essential. At such time she was in no state to guide John's response, or to curb her own emotional acts if he should direct them wrongly.

Tess was twenty-one years old and a fully qualified nurse. Therefore, she was fully aware of the reaction it was reasonable to expect from the man she was showering with kisses. Perhaps the reason she continued to seek the company of no other man, after a year of John Dobbie's companionship, was because she knew this danger and had learned that John would not see in her behaviour anything she did not intend.

She did not know why her passions piled up and then reached such an explosion-point. On the farm some miles out of the mining town, when she was a child, it had seemed normal. Other children were like that. The farm, where a multitude of things constantly went wrong, was enough to explain the build-up of emotion till it had to have an outlet. And, of course, she had her mother on whom to unload her unreasoning feelings.

She was appalled after her first emotional demonstration in John Dobbie's arms. She had begged him to believe that her behaviour did not mean what he might think. She tried to explain it to him. He was hardly able to understand it, but he

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did understand that she would refuse to see him again unless he reassured her.

"Anyway," he said, "I can't get married till I've qualified as a mine overseer, so I'm not going to get myself in any kind of complications with you."

He avoided actually saying, or promising, that he would marry her when he got his overseer's ticket. That was quite a long way off and Tess was not at all certain she wanted to leave nursing and get married, either. She was devoted to nursing. She felt pride in doing her work supremely well. It was a career which had meaning and, from the little she had seen of the wives of mine managers, she did not think their activities had any meaning at all. So Tess avoided the question of marriage as carefully as John did. She liked him mildly, at most times, and then, when her heart was full to breaking-point with emotions she could not name, she appeared to love him.

She returned to her room after the meeting with John no longer pent-up, her heart calm, but a little worried. John was not the man to say Amos meant to kick up a fuss unless he was sure of it. If the Medical Superintendent was charged with neglect of duty the entire hospital was in for a shake-up, Tess thought.

Jane was in the room and she saw the concern in Tess's eyes.

"So you had a quarrel with him at last!" Jane said. "What's the good of going with a bloke all that time without a few good old-fashioned tiffs?"

"No, I didn't have a fight with him. He told me the Board is likely to start making things uncomfortable for us here. I was thinking about that."

"Huh! The Board'll make things uncomfortable for Dr. Malling just as soon as they think they've got a case against him and you know why, don't you?"

"You mean because of that letter he wrote to the Health Department? About the dust in the mines?"

"And the statement he made to the newspaper when the mine managers as good as told him he didn't know what he was talking about. It cost them a few thousand quid to put in the dust-control equipment."

"But they should have been grateful. All those miners were having their lungs ruined. The miffe-owners didn't know until Dr. Malling showed that it was fine dust in the mine that you can't see, dust they didn't know was there."

"How do you know they didn't know? They're not fools. Anyway, they'll never forgive Dr. Malling for making them fork out all that money."

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"As if they think of nothing but money! They're human beings like the rest of us."

"Maybe your John is," Jane laughed, "but he isn't a mine manager yet. Wait till he's at the top and has shares in the company."

"Anyway, if they make it so unpleasant for Dr. Malling that he leaves they'll lose the best doctor this hospital ever had."

"They will," Jane said. "Wait and see."

Jane went out and Tess had a little time to lie down and rest. Jane's last words were in her mind. Jane did not know of the incident with Mrs. Gillen, so she could not have any special reason for what she said. Tess did know of it and John said that the Hospital Board knew of it. If the Board really wanted to get rid of Dr. Malling, they had something they could now use.

And Tess could not find any defence for him. He had left the hospital with someone when it was his duty to be there. He must have been gone for over an hour. He himself had said that Mrs. Gillen would have died if he had reached her five minutes later. Tess would hardly have believed it if someone had told her. As it was, she wanted not to believe it.

She reported for duty that night with the affair still in her mind. She knew that there can be many sides to the same person's character. As a nurse, she saw only one side of Dr. Malling's character. Possibly, away from the hospital, he was an entirely different person. Possibly this other side of him had affected his character as a doctor.

Tess reported to Sister Falcon and commenced her duties. As soon as she went into the ward, she saw Dr. Malling at one of the beds. He was examining a patient.

Dr. Malling was a big man. His shoulders were broad and powerful, his face large-featured and rugged. It was a strong face, not the face of a man who would lead a divided life, one part entirely different, contradicting what she knew of him. Tess had occasion to go to the patient the doctor was examining, and he asked Tess to assist the patient on to her side. His manner was very reserved, remote, but not curt. He could be cutting at times, when it seemed necessary to get the response he wanted from a nurse. Tonight he seemed deeply thoughtful, too preoccupied to notice which nurse was obeying his instructions.

He dismissed Tess and she went on with her other duties. He left the ward and Tess saw him talking to the sister. When Tess had reason to go to the day-room again, Dr. Malling had gone to his office.

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Sister Falcon looked up from the desk where she was entering records on a sheet.

"Nurse Walden! What did you tell Mrs. Amos last night?"

"Do you mean about the Gillen case?"

"Of course. Do you remember what you said?"

"Yes, I told her that we couldn't leave Mrs. Gillen to answer senseless calls because Mrs. Gillen was in a dangerous condition."

"Did you say anything about Dr. Malling?"

"No, I don't think I mentioned him in particular. She was kicking up an awful fuss when I came back after trying to find him, and I told her I'd been away from the ward looking for the doctor because Mrs. Gillen was getting worse."

"Did you say you couldn't find him?"

"No, Sister, I'm sure I didn't mention that."

"I was pretty sure you hadn't. She asked me if we managed to locate him and I said of course we did. The way she looked at me I don't think she believed me."

"I suppose she just wants to see how much trouble she can make," Tess said. "She didn't like being scolded last night."

"Well, she's pretty sure to ask you tonight. You'll have to be careful what you say."

"Maybe she'll sleep all night. She ought to. She kept herself awake all last night just to annoy us."

In fact, Mrs. Amos was sound asleep when Tess passed her room and looked in. Tess sighed her relief, for she could not decide how to answer Mrs. Amos in case she asked the question she had asked Sister Falcon.

Telling an outright lie was contrary to Tess's nature. Even in a case like this, where the truth would be used against a doctor for whom Tess had so much respect and against the entire hospital staff, perhaps, she would find it difficult to lie. She had not located the doctor. No one had been able to find him. Tragedy was averted only because he returned in time.

There was another side to it that Tess tried not to think about. If the case had been a little more urgent, or if something had delayed Dr. Malling a few minutes longer, his absence would have cost Mrs. Gillen her life.

Perhaps the Board was right in making an issue of it. Maybe a lie told to prevent the Board from knowing what actually happened would encourage another incident of the kind, one which could end fatally. These problems were no concern of a nurse, but Tess could not help thinking of them.

The ward was quiet that night. There were no patients

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in danger, and Mrs. Amos was sleeping soundly when Sister Falcon's telephone rang.

She listened and said, "Yes, very well."

She beckoned Tess. "You'll have to assist with an operation. An accident in the mine, one of Dr. Villers' patients. Dr. Villers is sending him here for Dr. Malling to operate."

Dr. Villers, who was in private practice, had his own hospital. This was not the first time outside doctors had sent patients for Dr. Malling's attention. Since the journal of the Medical Association had reported a new technique in neuro-surgery developed by Dr. Malling, a number of patients had been sent to him by other doctors in the district.

Tess went at once to the operating theatre and did the few things needed to prepare for an operation. Dr. Malling came in, bringing his own special instruments which he used only for neuro-surgery.

"An eye injury," he said. "From Dr. Villers' description of it, I've never seen a case quite like it."

"Will Dr. Villers come with the patient?"

"Yes, he'll look after the anaesthetic."

Ambulance bearers brought the man in on a stretcher. His entire face was covered in bandages. They put him on to the table and left. Dr. Villers appeared, and began taking the bandages off the accident-victim.

"I suppose you'll want to confirm my diagnosis," Villers said.

Tess gasped when she saw the face of the man on the table. Evidently he had been too near to a charge of explosives when it was detonated. Small fragments of rock must have struck one side of his face, penetrating deeply, making his face look as if the flesh had been minced. The eyes did not appear to have been injured, but Tess saw at once that they were dead. Though the patient was conscious, his eyes did not move in their sockets.

"I'll make a couple of quick tests," Dr. Malling said. "I'm pretty sure you're right, just the same."

He used special instruments, one of which detected activity in the nervous system which did not show in muscle-movement. The other applied the stimulæ to any group of nerves so that the first instrument could detect normal reaction, or the degree of failure of the nerves.

"Yes, it calls for quick repair," Malling said. "If we don't succeed, he'll be totally blind."

This was an operation much of which Tess couldn't see. Once the injured nerve-tissues were exposed, only the powerful lenses worn by the doctors could reveal what was being done, but the nerve-channels Dr. Malling sought lay behind the eye-

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sockets, and Tess found herself holding her breath as she supplied him with the instruments he called for, and saw him work with painstaking care and amazing skill to reach the essential point without injury to any of the delicate organs among which he was probing. She felt exhausted from sheer strain when, at last, he put on his special glasses.

He worked intently for another two or three minutes, then nodded. Thereafter, for a time, he used only his special instruments, and Tess heard Dr. Villers, who was able to follow the operation, whisper an exclamation of surprise and admiration.

Then came a process of closing tiny incisions and applying special dressings about which Tess knew nothing, and which seemed to be new to Dr. Villers also. It took longer than the operation that had been required to reach the point of injury, and Dr. Villers had to administer a little extra anaesthetic while Dr. Malling completed the work.

The man's face was again bandaged, and all three went to the washroom and removed their gloves, masks and gowns.

"There must be a dozen more fragments of rock that will require operations," Dr. Malling said. "I think it's all fairly straightforward. Don't you?"

"At any rate, it isn't urgent," Dr. Villers said. "I can do it after this operation is just about healed. Do you want to keep him here so you can supervise the nursing?"

"Not unless you want me to. There are some special measures needed, but we can talk it over."

"Shall I call the ambulance for him?" Tess asked.

Dr. Malling turned his face to her, and she saw a light in his eyes similar to what she had seen the previous night when he returned after his strange absence.

His gaze remained on her for quite a long time. The glow that transformed his face held Tess's attention, so that she had no idea how long they were silent and motionless merely looking at each other, not even thinking. Dr. Villers broke the interlude by saying that he thought it best to move his patient before the effects of the anaesthetic passed.

"Of course," Dr. Malling said. "You must pardon me for staring, Nurse, beauty seems to have a special effect on me at moments like this, when I feel that I've achieved something worthy."

It was not surprising that Dr. Malling was held by her beauty. Tess was not surprised by it, for it had happened to others. Her dark auburn hair and deep-blue eyes, her striking features and lovely figure made her more than merely a pretty girl.

What surprised Tess was that, after an operation that seemed

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to her to place him among the great surgeons of the world, she should see that same warm and warming light in his eyes that she had seen when he had almost caused a patient's death through his own neglect.

She telephoned for the ambulance. Then she set to work sterilizing the instruments. The two doctors went to Dr. Mallings' office, where they began discussing the care of the patient. Sister Falcon came and looked into the theatre, and asked Tess if she would be free soon.

"I have to wait for the ambulance before I can finish here," Tess said. "Do you need me in the ward?"

"I can manage for a little while longer," Sister Falcon said. "I didn't send for a relieving nurse because the ward is so quiet tonight."

"It was a marvellous operation," Tess said, unable to hold back the emotional thrill she felt at having assisted even slightly. "No wonder patients are sent here from Sydney."

"Well, there are people in this town who won't listen to a single good word said about Dr. Mallings. They'd drive him out of town if they had their way."

"I don't think they can be as bad as that, Sister."

"You'll see. Report back to the ward as soon as you can."

After seeing the patient taken to the ambulance, Tess finished her work in the theatre. She found the ward still quiet when she returned to it, and it was not until she was almost due to go off duty in the morning that she had to go into Mrs. Amos' private ward, where she found her patient awake.

"How do you feel now?" Tess asked. "You had a real good rest last night."

"I feel better," Mrs. Amos said. "Did you have an easy night?"

"Yes, except that I had to help Dr. Mallings with a rush operation. A mine accident."

"Oh, so Dr. Mallings was here last night, was he? What about the night before? Did you manage to find him?"

"Of course, but you mustn't ask me to discuss the doctors, Mrs. Amos. It's strictly against the rules."

"Well, it was you who told me she was dying when you dying. Where was . . .?"

"A nurse is not allowed to discuss other patients," Tess interrupted. "You mustn't ask me about them."

"Well, it was you who told me she was dying when you were . . ."

"I was merely explaining why I couldn't answer your call every time you rang the bell. Now don't ask me to go into details, or I'll get into trouble. You can understand that it

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wouldn't do for nurses to talk about patients' symptoms and complaints to other patients."

"Oh, all right. But I'm not just an ordinary patient, you know."

"We all know that," Tess said as she left the room.

She thought that would be the end of it. No harm had been done. An innocent remark made to induce a little reason in Mrs. Amos had been retailed to Mr. Amos, no doubt, with quite a lot added. Even so, nothing of a damning nature had been said, and Mrs. Amos' questions indicated that Amos wanted something more definite before making his attack on Dr. Malling. Tess thought she had extinguished Mrs. Amos' hope of making mischief.

She was relieved, and had breakfast. She was going to the quarters when a nurse stopped her and told her she had to see the Matron.

Matron Kinkead was proud of the hospital. It was not large or elaborately equipped, as were the leading hospitals in the cities, and being Matron of a public hospital in a mining town was not the exalted position enjoyed by Matrons of the larger institutions; but Matron Kinkead knew that her hospital was well-conducted, and she demanded high standards from the nursing staff, and got a very high standard of efficiency from them. In addition, she worked under a Medical Superintendent who had established a nation-wide reputation for his treatment of a special type of case, and the hospital itself was rapidly gaining a reputation because of Dr. Malling's work. Some of that added prestige must go to the Matron.

So Tess found herself facing a very stern, very displeased woman when she entered Matron's office.

"I want the truth from you, Nurse Walden, with nothing covered up. Did you tell Mrs. Amos that a patient came close to death because Dr. Malling was absent from the hospital?"

"No, Matron, I didn't tell her that. I told her that Mrs. Gillen was having a bad turn, and that her condition was dangerous. I told her that in the hope Mrs. Amos would stop demanding attention for herself every few minutes."

"Did you tell her that Dr. Malling had left the hospital and left no message to say how we could reach him?"

"Certainly not."

"She seems to think you did. The matter has reached the Hospital Board. You must have said something to give her the idea."

"Well, when she complained she had been ringing for me and I had ignored her, I told her I had to look for the doctor for Mrs. Gillen, so I didn't hear her calling."

"That was very foolish of you, Nurse. You must have seen

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that Mrs. Amos was looking for something she could use to make trouble for us. You had no right to say that Mrs. Gillen was in danger. We don't tell other patients that sort of thing; and you had no business saying you had to search for the doctor. No patient, no matter who she is, is entitled to the constant attention of the nursing-staff when her condition doesn't require it. That is all you had to tell her?"

"Yes, Matron. I'm sorry."

"Do you want the reputation of the hospital ruined by a false scandal? Surely you realise that this hospital is getting a very high reputation entirely through the work of Dr. Malling and the staff under him. And there are people in the town who would like to ruin that reputation. You see, Nurse, Dr. Malling refuses to keep quiet about things it is his duty to correct. If these people can ruin his reputation . . ."

"I'm sorry I said what I did, Matron, but I had no idea—"

"You did say it. That's the point. And a certain construction has been put on it by some members of the Board. I'm talking this way to you because I'm sure the Board will hold a meeting on the matter, and they'll demand to question you. I want you to understand what's at stake."

"Yes, I'll remember that," Tess promised.

She went to her room deeply thoughtful. She saw that Jane's notion of some of the important people in town wanting to get rid of Dr. Malling because he had compelled proper health measures in the mines was not idle talk. Tess was getting ready to go to bed, trying to think of a way to answer the questions she would be asked without playing into the hands of the enemies of the Medical Superintendent, when she was called to the telephone.

"I didn't get you out of bed, did I?" John's voice asked.

"No, but almost. I was about to get into bed."

"I won't keep you away from it. I rang to ask you if you'd let me drive you out home for a swim in our pool this afternoon."

"I'd enjoy that," Tess said. "It's going to be a hot day. What time will I need to get up?"

"Suppose I call for you at half past three? I'll take two hours off work."

"Good. Now, ring off and let me get to bed."

John Dobbie's telephone call drove the interview with Matron out of Tess's mind, but what Matron had said came back with renewed force as soon as Tess got to her room. For it simply confirmed what John had said. It showed that Amos was not alone in looking for something he could use against Dr. Malling. If it was only one member of the Board, if the rest valued Dr. Malling's service to the hospital above what annoyance he may

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have caused them, then there would be no Board meeting to go into the matter.

John's father was on the Board. Possibly he would be home when they went to the house for their swim. Perhaps she was asked to go today so that John's father could ask her more about the incident. Tess went to sleep with this in her mind, reminding herself that she could not answer any questions, even though Dobbie was on the Board.

There was no hint of anything of the sort when John met her that afternoon, however. And there was no sign of either of John's parents when they reached the house, or at any time that afternoon. The clear water was refreshing, and they swam and dived for a time, and then lay on the grass beside the pool in the shade of trees.

"Dad tells me the Hospital Board is going to investigate that story Mrs. Amos told," John said then. "Did you hear about it?"

"Yes, Matron told me this morning."

"Amos means to get you up before them and make you tell exactly what happened."

"I suppose they can do that," Tess said. "It's unusual, of course, a kind of insult to Matron, you know."

"I don't see why."

"Well, Matron is responsible for the nursing staff. If the Board wants to know anything concerning them, it's the Matron's place to supply the information."

"But this is about the Medical Superintendent."

"Oh, but they can't question a nurse about a doctor's actions. They can only question me about what I said to one of the patients, and the reason I didn't answer Mrs. Amos's bell when she rang it."

"It amounts to the same thing."

"Except that Matron is the one who should account to the Board for my actions."

John was silent, thinking for a moment. Then he said, "Yes, I can see that, but Dad reckons the Matron and that sister who was in charge are trying to cover up. They mean to get you before them and get the truth from you."

"So it is meant to be an insult to Matron. It'd serve them right if she and Sister Falcon both resigned in protest. Then your Board would be in a fix."

"Well, I don't know anything about it," John said. "I only hope you won't join in the scheme to hush it all up. Will you promise to tell the truth, Tess?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't help it, even if I tried. I'm like that. It's a bit awkward sometimes."

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"You mean it will be awkward when the Board asks you about Dr. Malling?"

"I mean it's often awkward. There are all kinds of things it would be more comfortable to lie about, but I don't seem able to do it."

"That's one thing I like about you. Another thing is that you're so very pretty in that swim-suit. Shall we swim the length of the pool again and then see if the cook has got some coffee ready for us?"

CHAPTER III

The swim made Tess feel good when John let her out of his car at the nurses' quarters. She was humming to herself as she went up the stairs and looked into the recreation room.

Dot and Ellie were there, apparently deeply interested in their conversation. Tess let herself into a chair, and picked up the local newspaper which she had not found time to read that day. As she looked over the headlines, she heard what Dot was saying to Ellie.

"Oh, I know what I'd do if I was Matron. These nurses who can't keep their mouths shut! We're not that short of nurses that we have to put up with it."

Jane came to the door and heard the last few words. She said nothing, but came and sat down beside Tess.

"Well, I reckon it's worse than that," Ellie was saying. "Playing up to the toffs, the mine-managers and all that. Getting invited for swims in their private pools while ordinary nurses have to . . ."

Tess threw down the paper. "I'll go to my room so you can speak more freely," she said, and ran out.

Jane went with her. In their room Jane hugged her.

"Don't pay any attention to them," she begged. "It's been going on all over the hospital all day. They reckon the Board is holding an enquiry over something you told Mrs. Amos, only half the nurses say it wasn't Mrs. Amos you told it to, but John Dobbie."

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"What do they think I said?"

"Nobody knows. They think it's something about Dr. Malling. It's like I said, Tess, the mine managers and that crowd are just itching to find something they can use against him, and the girls think you've played into their hands. Everybody's on Dr. Malling's side."

"But so am I. I wouldn't do anything to harm Dr. Malling."

"They think you're so keen to keep in good with John and his family that you'd pick on something and make it look bad, and give them their chance."

"But it isn't so! It's the other way around, if anything. Mrs. Amos was furious because I couldn't come to her room every time she tinkled that bell. She's just trying to get even by getting me into trouble, I suppose."

"Of course I know it isn't so," Jane said. "I've had half a dozen fights today through standing up for you. You'd be better to just ignore them, Tess."

That was what Tess decided to do. She knew it would not be easy. She knew how very vicious a group of girls can be when they put their heads together, and she supposed some of them may have been a little jealous of her friendship with John Dobbie. She reported for duty, and, at once, as soon as she appeared, Sister Falcon told her she had to report to the operating theatre.

Night operations were rare except in cases of emergency, and no nurse was assigned specially for that work at night. When Tess was on duty, she was called in.

"Has there been another accident?" she asked.

"No, but Dr. Malling decided to do the operation tonight instead of waiting till tomorrow."

"I don't mind, of course, but how will you manage?"

"There'll be a relieving nurse. You'll report back here when you've finished in the theatre."

Dr. Malling was in the operating theatre when Tess got there. Young Dr. Bacon was with him.

Dr. Bacon was the youngest of the staff doctors, a very devoted and a very ambitious doctor who looked on the Superintendent as a genius. Tess knew that, whatever might be the truth about Dr. Malling's absence from the hospital the other night, and whatever others might say, Dr. Bacon would never listen to a word against him.

Tess thought that Dr. Bacon's greeting was very cool, but Dr. Malling was particularly cordial.

"I'm sorry I had to call on you again, Nurse," he said. "I intended to do this operation in the morning, but I'm afraid I might not have time."

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He avoided saying why he might not have time. Perhaps the enquiry was listed for the morning. She wondered if that was why he made the apology, whether it was an indirect means of reminding her of it. His manner gave no hint of reproach, however. He spoke in a friendly way, with little expression in his face as he said it.

"I don't mind at all," Tess said. "I rather like assisting you."

He looked quickly up into her face, and she was afraid she might be blushing. It was a foolish thing to say and he seemed surprised.

"I mean I find it interesting because so many of your operations are different, not at all like the run-of-the-mill operation."

"Some of them are," he said. "This one may be. It's a patient sent here from Victoria. It appears to be a case similar to some others we've treated successfully."

He was referring to the new application he had made of neuro-surgery, which had attracted attention in the medical profession. Tess did what was needed to prepare for the operation. Then she looked at the card with the case-history of the patient who was to be brought in. Dr. Malling and Dr. Bacon had been discussing it when she entered.

The patient was a woman who suffered from chronic cramps of the stomach and serious digestive disorders. Tests before she was sent to the hospital had established that vital secretions essential to proper digestion were totally absent in the alimentary canal. All the usual treatment for such complaints had failed to induce any improvement.

The patient was brought in and placed on the table. Dr. Bacon administered the anaesthetic. No doubt, in a case like this, he would have asked permission to do this in order to observe the operation.

They turned the woman on to her stomach, and bared her back to the waist. Then Dr. Malling paused.

"This is a case where I've had to deduce the cause of the symptoms, Doctor," he explained. "As you know, I've had the patient under observation for two weeks. I've eliminated every other possibility as far as I can judge, so I'll expose the nerve-channel. It's the only way I can confirm my opinion. If I'm wrong, there's no harm done."

After that, until the operation was finished, he said nothing except to call for the instruments he required. No man could be more utterly intent on what he was doing than was Dr. Malling when he was engaged in a nerve operation. He made a deep incision between two of the woman's ribs near the back-bone. That much Tess could see, but what he did afterwards was too minute for her to follow.

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She would have had to wear glasses as powerful as those the doctors wore to see anything. She could only guess how the operation was going — from the instruments for which Dr. Malling called. She gathered from these that he was making a secondary incision of a very delicate nature, for he worked intensely, but with infinite care, for many minutes. Eventually, he straightened his back, turned his head to Dr. Bacon and nodded.

Tess could not tell what he saw which he confirmed by that nod. It was a nod of satisfaction, however, and she guessed he had found what he expected. He must have exposed the nerve which he suspected as being the cause of all the faulty functioning of the patient's digestion, he must have found something there that bore out his diagnosis.

He worked with tiny instruments, with the instruments Tess had never seen used except by him. He worked for more than a quarter of an hour, while Dr. Bacon watched.

He closed the incisions and applied the dressings. He did this with as much care as he had worked on the actual nerve-tissue. Then he nodded to Tess, and she called the wardsmen to return the patient to the ward.

They all went to the wash-room. The light was in Dr. Malling's face again, though there had been no such glow before the operation. There was a feeling of satisfaction and pride in Dr. Bacon, though his part in the operation had been little more important than Tess's.

"That woman would have died but for this operation," Bacon said.

"Possibly not," Malling corrected. "It's possible to keep such cases alive by feeding predigested food, but her life would have been nothing but pain."

"We can't be sure she is cured till we see if the symptoms re-appear," Dr. Bacon suggested.

"That's the test, of course, but we'll know before morning. If she comes out of the anaesthetic without any of those cramps, we can call it a cure."

The doctors left the theatre, and Tess did the necessary work following an operation and then reported to Sister Falcon. She took up her duties in the ward where the relieving nurse left off, and was busy for an hour or more. Mrs. Amos had left hospital that day, so there were no annoyances.

Tess's thoughts were on the operation she had just witnessed. There was nothing miraculous about it. Probably almost any neuro-surgeon would have handled those special instruments as skillfully as did Dr. Malling. No doubt many would be capable of repairing a damaged nerve, or a nerve-system that had got

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tangled in some way. But Dr. Malling had recognised signals of trouble where others had failed to. In a case such as this tonight, all other doctors, until Dr. Malling's work was reported, would have gone on treating the patient for chronic digestive trouble, trying drug after drug without effect. And the woman would have gone on suffering until she died.

There must be hundreds of cases, Tess thought, where a chronic illness, or impairment of functions, was due to a similar cause, cases that defied treatment, but which could be completely cured by Malling's method. She began to see, as she had not seen before, the immense value of his work, the effect it had far beyond what they experienced in this small hospital.

And she could not believe that the same man had been guilty of such irresponsibility as to go off and leave a hospital full of patients with no provision to call him in an emergency. What had really happened? She found this question coming to her mind every few minutes while she went about her routine work. Where was he? He had said nothing about his absence to her or to the sister.

She remembered her school-girl thrill in reading about Dr. Jekyll, another doctor with all the qualities of near-perfection. That was just a story, of course, just a thrill. No one really thought that the personality of someone admired and trusted by them might conceal something entirely different, something irresponsible, treacherous and vile, as in the story. And yet, Tess supposed, there were such cases. She had heard someone say that the most brilliant men were most apt to have such a hidden personality because brilliant minds were more complicated than others.

Sister Falcon made coffee at midnight. Most of the work was done by then, so they could sit down and take their time drinking it.

"I suppose you heard about the Board enquiry?" the Sister asked.

"Nobody told me, but I guessed it would be tomorrow morning. Is that it?"

"That's right. In the Super's office. You'll have to be there, you know."

"I think it's silly just the same. If I did anything wrong, it's up to the Matron . . ."

"You did something wrong, Nurse, but that isn't what they're interested in. You should have known better than to let your tongue wag, especially to Mrs. Amos."

"But what I said wasn't . . ."

"You weren't thinking about how she'd use it, but you should"

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have. Everybody knows there are men on the Board who'd do anything to destroy Dr. Mallings' reputation."

"Honestly, I didn't believe that. I still think people are slandering them. I think the real trouble is that Mrs. Amos got annoyed when we scolded her, and she's making as much trouble as she can."

"Well, it comes to the same thing. They're trying to make a case against the Superintendent, and they're using what you said to Mrs. Amos. I can tell you this, Nurse, nobody else on the staff is going to give them any help to get rid of him. What are you going to do?"

"Do you want me to tell lies?"

"Do you want them to throw Dr. Mallings out in disgrace? You know what that means to a doctor. You know how it would affect the hospital. Would you like to see that?"

"No!" Tess whispered in an uneven voice. "It's the last thing I want! But where was he, Sister? Why couldn't we find him?"

"That's none of your business. There'd have been no harm done if you hadn't blabbed nonsense to Mrs. Amos."

That was not a fair way of putting it, but Tess saw that Sister Falcon was as angry about it as the rest of the nurses. None of them were behaving sensibly. All were too angry to see that their charges and suspicions against Tess were based on a few words which any of them would have used if they had been on duty that night, and had been nagged as Tess was. It was Tess who had made the innocent remarks, however, and Sister Falcon was hinting very strongly that it was Tess's duty to undo the damage by denying the facts.

Tess had time for a bath, time to change her clothes before she was required at the Superintendent's office. She went in a fresh uniform, thinking it better to wear a uniform than to appear in street clothes. Matron gave her a faint smile of approval, and took her into the office and told her to sit down.

Neither Dr. Mallings nor the Board members were there as yet. Sister Falcon came in and sat down beside the Matron. Then the members of the Board filed in, followed by Dr. Mallings, who showed no nervousness or concern. He was polite and pleasant to the members of the Board, including Amos and Dobbie, with whom he had clashed over health measures in the mines they managed.

Mr. Amos took control of the gathering at once. He glanced with a scowl around at Matron, Sister Falcon and Nurse Walden.

"We'll question you nurses separately," he barked. "Matron Kinkead and Nurse Walden can wait outside while we talk to Sister Falcon."

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"We certainly will not," Matron said in a withering tone. "I want to tell you, Mr. Amos, and the other members of the Board, that you've no right bringing the nurses before the Board. I'm responsible for the conduct of my staff. I'm responsible to the Board, and you can question me about the staff. You have no right to question my staff. That's my business."

"It isn't the conduct of your staff that concerns us just now, Matron. This concerns the Medical Superintendent."

"And I have to uphold the standards of the nursing profession, Mr. Amos. No nurse, not even a Matron, is permitted by our rules to express opinions about the doctors under whom she works. You know that, don't you?"

"It isn't a question of opinion, Matron. It's a question of fact. Sister Falcon and Nurse Walden know the facts. That's why they're here."

"The professional conduct of a doctor is involved. I object to bringing nurses on my staff into a discussion involving the professional standing of one of our doctors. It's entirely wrong. It strikes at the roots of good discipline."

"I'm afraid we'll have to ignore your objections, Matron," Amos said. "We're determined to get the facts from these nurses. Will you and Nurse Walden leave so we can talk to . . ."

"No, Mr. Amos, we will not leave. Since you're insisting on discussing Dr. Malling with my staff, I'm insisting that each of us hears all that is said. It will damage discipline much less than if each knows only a fragment of it. If I did my full duty, I'd order both of them out and forbid them to discuss a staff doctor with the Board, or anybody else."

"You seem to forget that the Board controls the hospital," Dobbie put in. "You are employed by us, Matron."

"I won't be employed by you one minute longer then."

She pulled a sheet of paper toward herself, and took her fountain pen from her pocket.

"I'll give you my resignation in writing if you want it that way."

The Board members exchanged uneasy glances.

"Nobody wants you to resign," Dobbie said. "We value your services, Matron."

"Then if you want to know something about the conduct of this hospital, ask me. If you insist on going beyond me to nurses under me, then I insist on being present. Stop this hole-in-the-corner business, as if you were detectives grilling a criminal!"

Two or three of the members of the Board blushed at that.

"Very well," Amos said. "Have it your own way. You know what brought us here, don't you? The case of Mrs. Gillen."

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"Mrs. Gillen is recovering nicely. Beyond that, I can't say anything. Not even a doctor is permitted to reveal details of a patient's complaint without the patient's consent."

"Not her complaint, Matron. She had a bad turn shortly after an operation, didn't she?"

"Yes, Sister Falcon reported that to me. I wasn't on duty at the time. Sister Falcon was acting as Matron that night."

"Was there a doctor in attendance when . . ."

"According to the report I got, Dr. Malling himself attended her, performed a second operation."

"Did the staff on duty at the time have trouble locating Dr. Malling? Was the patient in . . ."

"That wasn't reported. I never ask my staff for reports on the movements of the doctors around the wards."

"So you don't know whether the patient's life was in danger due to . . ."

"No nurse can know a thing like that. We haven't the medical knowledge. If we think there is an emergency, we call the doctor. That's what the sister did."

"I see." Mr. Amos was getting nettled. Some of the others were looking a little crestfallen. "Then we'd better ask Sister Falcon what occurred," he added.

"I don't see what there is to ask me," Sister Falcon snapped. "Matron told you the patient had a bad turn, and I called the doctor to her. She recovered and is progressing very well at present."

Dobbie cleared his throat. He seemed to think that Mr. Amos was getting too nettled to carry on the enquiry in the face of Sister Falcon's manner.

"We employ three doctors," Dobbie said gravely. "I understand that all three are on duty during the daytime?"

"They arrange their times on duty themselves. That's no business of mine."

"Of course not, except that you have to know there is a doctor available when he is needed. How about night duty? What do you do when you want to call a doctor to a patient at night?"

"Just call him. If he's not in . . ."

"You know which one to call?"

"Of course. Matron informs all the ward sisters which doctor is available at night."

"And the night Mrs. Gillen took bad?"

"Dr. Malling was on duty that night. That's why I called him."

"Were either of the other doctors where you could reach them in case Dr. Malling wasn't able to come?"

"I don't know. I wasn't told anything about that."

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"But when you called Dr. Mallings's office he wasn't there, was he?"

"No, he wasn't in his office. None of the doctors sit twirling their thumbs in the office all night. Dr. Brown is usually in his quarters. Dr. Bacon spends part of the night talking to the ward sisters after the patients have settled down and there isn't much to do. A doctor isn't a switch-board attendant sitting at his telephone all night just in case he's wanted."

"Still, it is necessary for him to be where you can find him, isn't it?" Dobbie asked.

"Of course it is."

"And were you able to find him?"

"I've already told you."

Dr. Mallings never once tried to interrupt. Tess glanced at him once or twice, but he looked as if he was hardly interested in what was being said. When Falcon gave this answer he glanced at her briefly, that was all.

Amos turned his face full on Sister Falcon and asked, "How long did it take you to find Dr. Mallings when you wanted him for Mrs. Gillen?"

"Huh! The hospital isn't a race-course. We don't time a doctor with a stop-watch."

"Was Mrs. Gillen on the point of death when the doctor reached her?" Amos demanded.

"That's no question to ask a nurse. You can ask Dr. Mallings."

"I will," Amos said grimly. "In the meantime, is it a fact that you were very distressed for fear she would die before you found Dr. Mallings?"

"I was very distressed because her pulse was erratic and her colour was bad."

"And it took you an hour to find the doctor?"

"Certainly not."

"Half an hour?"

"Nowhere near half an hour. Maybe five minutes, possibly ten. I tell you I didn't put a stop-watch on him."

"Did you have reason to believe he had left the hospital?"

"I didn't ask him where he was. I've been trained as a nurse, and I know better."

Dobbie intervened again. He turned to Tess and said, "Nurse Walden was on duty that night. You told Mrs. Amos that you'd been away from the ward looking for Dr. Mallings. Was that true?"

Tess felt her heart pounding painfully, and her nerves were strained so that she trembled. Sister Falcon had not told the truth. She thought what she said was for the best, no doubt,

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but it was not the truth. And now Tess was required to tell a lie, or else to accuse Sister Falcon of lying.

"Yes, Mrs. Amos was demanding attention every few minutes that night. She was terribly annoyed because we had other things to do and couldn't be bringing her drinks of iced water in the middle of the night. She demanded to know where I'd been, and I told her I'd been looking for Dr. Mallings.

"Where did you go to look for him?" Amos demanded.

"To the other wards, of course, to any part of the hospital where his duties as Superintendent might take him."

"Did you find him?" Amos asked.

"Not until after I had been to Mrs. Amos. We were able to call him to Mrs. Gillen after I said that."

"You went all over this hospital, to every ward, to every part of it, looking for the doctor. Could you do that in five or ten minutes?"

"I don't think so," Tess said. "I think it would take fifteen minutes at least."

"And you told my wife that Mrs. Gillen was dying while you hunted . . ."

"I didn't say she was dying. I said we thought she was in danger. I was trying to make your wife understand that she was demanding attention that was badly needed by other patients."

"Where did you find Dr. Mallings, after all this search?" Amos demanded.

"In the corridor, coming toward our ward."

"But you had been all over the hospital and couldn't find him. How do you account for that?"

"I don't know. I suppose . . ."

The Matron was looking at Tess with accusation in every line of her face. Sister Falcon was looking at her as if she had been caught committing a murder. Tess felt tears trying to force their way out, and she doubted if she would be able to answer another question.

"Doesn't that prove that Dr. Mallings wasn't in the hospital? That he was just returning when you met him in the corridor?"

Tess knew that was true, and she knew these men were just waiting to force her to say it was true. She tried to avoid saying it. She said, "It doesn't prove anything. I could have . . ."

She could not go on. Tears forced their way through her effort to hold them back. Her throat was tied in a knot, and words refused to come.

It was Dr. Mallings who came to her rescue. He spoke for the first time since the questioning commenced.

"This is all very silly," he said. "There was no need for it at all. All you had to do was ask me if I had left the hospital."

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Tess found that she no longer wanted to cry. She wanted to listen to what Dr. Malling was about to say. Nothing had ever seemed so important to her. She knew, as she waited, that this question, burning into her mind, had pushed almost everything else out in the last few days.

"We're coming to that," Amos said. "The Matron and nurses can go now."

"No, Mr. Amos," the doctor said. "This is my office, and I want them to stay. You brought them here needlessly, conducted this meeting as if it was a trial for some crime, and now you can hear the facts from me in their presence, or not at all."

"You're taking a pretty high hand, Doctor," Dobbie said.

"Yes, I am."

The way he said it silenced the objections.

CHAPTER IV

Dr. Malling smiled very faintly as he spoke. It was not a happy smile, however. It occurred to Tess that he may have been smiling at his own folly, or he may have been smiling at the set of circumstances he was powerless to alter. Every member of the Board scowled, appearing to resent the smile, perhaps feeling the sting of Dr. Malling's reprimand.

"The facts are easily stated," Dr. Malling said. "I had arranged to be in attendance myself on the night when Mrs. Gillen needed attention unexpectedly. Both Dr. Brown and Dr. Bacon were going out, and could not be called. The operation on Mrs. Gillen had been successful, but accepted methods of post-operation dressings on that type of operation proved inadequate in her case. The result was a crisis which developed very swiftly. It is true that she would probably have died if I had been five minutes later in reaching her. It is also true that there was considerable delay between the time Sister Falcon attempted to call me and my arrival at Mrs. Gillen's bedside. Nurse Walden told the plain truth when she said the patient was in danger. I think that covers the points you're concerned about, doesn't it, gentlemen? Oh, there's just one more thing. Mrs. Gillen's recovery was only slightly retarded by the complication. Her recovery will be as complete as if this had not occurred."

"You didn't tell us where you were when they were looking for you," Amos growled. "Were you anywhere in this hospital?"

"No, I had to leave for a little while."

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"Sister Falcon was in charge in Matron's absence. Did you tell her you were going? Did you tell her where she could reach you?"

"No, I wasn't able to do that."

Dobbie leaned forward, his eyes piercing. "Where did you go, Doctor?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not at liberty to answer that."

"I see. Can you tell us who you were with?"

"That's something else I can't reveal."

"Were you with a woman?"

"That question is entirely irrelevant, Mr. Dobbie."

"I see. Good old-time chivalry, eh? Never compromise the woman in the case."

"You're jumping at conclusions."

"Well, here's one question you'd better damn well answer. Do you admit that your action in leaving the hospital that night was irresponsible, that it was a breach of professional duty?"

"It was certainly not irresponsible, Mr. Dobbie. Perhaps it was a technical breach of duty to the hospital, but not a breach of duty as a doctor."

"No hair-splitting now!" Mr. Amos fumed. "You had a duty to be here, and you left, and a woman nearly lost her life because you weren't here. Doesn't that prove you're unworthy to hold the position of Medical Superintendent?"

"No, it does not. Not in any sense."

"How do you make that out?" Amos commenced to bluster. "You admit that you . . ."

"You asked for my opinion, Mr. Amos, and I gave it. I've had sharp differences with some of you gentlemen in the past, and I know that feelings ran high, but I'm hoping you'll consider this matter from the viewpoint of the hospital, and the value of the work I'm doing here. You all know of that work. I was fortunate enough to hit on something of great importance. The hospital is becoming quite famous as a result. It's in the interest of everyone for me to continue that work here. It will relieve a very great deal of human suffering, gentlemen, and it will be of value to the whole body of medical skills."

"Praising yourself up won't . . ."

"I'm not thinking of myself. Believe me, I'm thinking of the delay and loss in treating many cases that are being sent here from other towns, from other States; and I'm thinking of the loss your hospital will suffer."

He got up decisively and left the room.

Matron got to her feet. Tess had been barely aware of where she was as she listened to what Dr. Malling said. His abrupt

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departure seemed to her like the end of the episode. She could not imagine that such a plea as he had made could fail.

She went out into the corridor with Matron and Sister Falcon. She turned to Matron to say something about Dr. Malling's final plea, but Matron's cold stare silenced her. Then, close behind her, Sister Falcon whispered, "So you had to make me out a liar!"

Tess was brought back to cold reality so suddenly that it hurt. She turned away from the others and hurried to her room. She had forgotten that what the doctor said left the whole incident in doubt, that it permitted the most damaging construction to be placed on the fact of his absence. She realised that it was something about him, her admiration of his work, the seeming confidence in him, the warm glow of his personality, that had tricked her into thinking all was well.

In fact, she saw now that if she had altered the facts to fit Sister Falcon's statement, it might not have been necessary for Dr. Malling to say anything. The entire affair might have fizzled out. And yet she could not blame herself. She was sure that Amos would have insisted on asking the doctor about his movements, and she knew in her deepest heart that Dr. Malling would have made the same statement as she had just heard.

It seemed when she reached the quarters that all the nurses who were off duty were there waiting for Tess to return. It seemed also as if Sister Falcon must have sent word ahead of Tess, for these girls were not merely showing malice, they were furious. They gathered around Tess as she came up the stairs.

"How much did old Amos pay you to put the knife into the Super?" one asked.

"Pooh! Tess wouldn't have to be paid. All she'd ask is for John Dobbie to take her into a dark corner and . . ."

"A swim in Dobbie's private pool! And I'll bet you pay for it in more ways than one!"

They were in the hallway, barring Tess's way to her room. It was clear they had planned it, they meant to force Tess to hear all their sneers and insults. They continued as she tried to get past them to her room, and, as she failed to answer back in defence of herself, their jibes and insinuations became more unbearable. Tess held her temper in check as long as she could. The one thing she was most afraid of was breaking down and crying. She dare not answer back, or exchange abuse, for then she knew her tears would defeat her. She kept her lips tight shut, and her face rigid as she tried to press her way to her room.

As they barred her way, she pushed one girl out of her path. The girl called her a nasty name.

Tess slapped her face with all her strength. At that, two or three of the others took hold of Tess. She commenced to

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fight them off, but there were too many. It was then that Jane appeared.

Jane said not a word, but she commenced pulling the others away from Tess. She did it as roughly as necessary, and Tess also used her strength frantically. They reached their room and slammed and locked the door.

They heard the girls talking among themselves outside. They seemed to be planning a further move against Tess, but Matron's voice reached the two girls who were leaning against the door. Matron was scolding the others. She must have learned that Sister Falcon had encouraged what might have developed into a brawl. In a moment, there were no nurses in the hallway, but Matron did not come to Tess's room.

Jane put her arm around Tess.

"I'd like to whip the lot of them," she said. "Somebody told them that Sister Falcon and Matron were making the whole thing look like a bit of Mrs. Amos's malice, and then you showed Falcon up and proved she was lying."

"She didn't need to lie. It would have been better if she'd told the truth."

"There'll be the devil to pay if the rest of the story gets out," Jane said. "I got it from one of the wardsmen, and told him to keep his mouth shut about it."

"What did he tell you?"

"He saw a woman get out of a car that night and come to the entrance, but she wouldn't come in. She rang the bell and he went to ask her what she wanted. She said she had to see Dr. Mallings, but she wouldn't go inside to his office. He told the doctor, and Dr. Mallings came on to the porch to talk to her. Then he got into the car and drove off with her."

This news made Tess wince, and she sat down on her bed. She felt as if she was being crushed by forces pressing on her from every side.

"Was the wardsmen telling the truth?" Tess asked faintly.

But she knew it was the truth. Dr. Mallings had refused to say where he went, or who he was with. He had told the Board he was not at liberty to tell. Even then, Tess had felt this sense of disaster, for she could not help agreeing with the man who suggested the doctor was protecting the good name of the woman he was with.

"I'm sure it's the truth," Jane said.

"If Mr. Amos gets hold of that . . ."

"He's sure to. That wardsmen isn't any special friend of mine. If he told me, you can bet he told a dozen others."

Tess should have been in bed and asleep long before this. It was nearly noon, and she undressed and lay down, but she

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had no chance of sleeping. The whole affair with the Board kept going through her mind, and the attack by the other nurses, and what Jane had just told her. It went around and around, and came back always to the same place. Dr. Malling had deserted his post for an hour or so in order to be with a woman who refused to come into his office, no doubt for fear she would be recognised. She must be a married woman. The doctor was refusing to say who he was with for the same reason.

These were not only thoughts. The positive hatred she had seen in the eyes of Sister Falcon, the cold refusal to see Tess which the Matron had underlined as they left the office, the humiliating insults of the other nurses, had all combined to build up another pressure of emotions that would not let Tess sleep.

She was exhausted when the time came for her to get up. She did get up, and went to the bathroom and had a shower. She got dressed, but she knew it was no use. She could not do a night's work in the ward. She was too tired, and there would be too much enmity on every side. She would break down and make an exhibition of herself.

She needed another release of emotion, another opening of the flood-gates in the arms of John Dobbie. She must rid herself of this pressure in her breast.

She went to the telephone and asked to speak to the Matron. The dead-flat tone of Matron Kinkead's voice was not reassuring, but Tess was not expecting sympathy.

"I can't go on duty tonight, Matron," Tess said firmly. "I'm sorry, but I haven't been able to sleep."

"You brought it on yourself, Nurse."

"I said I'm not reporting for duty," Tess repeated.

"I heard you," Matron snapped, and cut the line.

Tess made a call to the mine office where John worked. His voice came over the wire with a warmth and cordiality that surprised her.

"I'm not working tonight," she told him. "Can you meet me and take me somewhere? Anywhere away from the hospital?"

"Can I meet you! I'll be there in half an hour."

She ran to his car when it pulled up. She was afraid some of the nurses might see them together and shout insults, as they had when she returned from the enquiry, but nothing happened. She thought Matron had threatened to discipline them if they did any more of that.

He got clear of the nurses' quarters, and turned the car

"Let's get away from here as quickly as you can," Tess begged. "The nurses are being terribly nasty today."

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toward his own place. "I'm taking you home to dinner," he said. "Plenty of time to talk before we have to eat."

As soon as they were out of the car, and alone, Tess unloosed the storm of emotion that was demanding expression. The emotions themselves had little to do with John Dobbie, but, as always, they demanded expression in the enfolding arms of someone, through unhindered kisses. And, as usual, the storm ended in tears that somehow seemed to have a healing effect.

When it had passed, and her tears were dried, John said, "You were wonderful this morning. I heard all about it."

He went on to talk about the Matron's evasions and Sister Falcon's falsehoods, and Tess's straightforward story. The proceedings at the enquiry were supposed to be secret, but John must have got it all from his father.

"It was terrible," Tess told him. "There's only one nurse in the entire hospital who will speak a civil word to me. They ganged up this morning after we left the office, and insulted me till I had to start a fight with some of them. You've no idea what it's like, having nothing but hate around you all the time."

"But you were only telling the truth, standing up for proper behaviour by the medical staff."

"That won't do me any good. Honestly, John, I can't face it. I can't go on working with people who hate me, and insult me every chance they get. Taking orders from Matron and from Sister Falcon when they look daggers at me as they give the orders."

"I know it must be pretty tough, but I'd stick it out if I were you. They'd made up a conspiracy of silence and you broke it. Of course they're annoyed, but they mightn't be there long. Things'll be different in that hospital pretty soon. A new Super and maybe a new Matron."

He thought he was reassuring her, but he made her feel guilty. There had been a tacit understanding at the hospital which Tess had ignored; but Matron and the sister had reached that understanding only because there was another conspiracy, a determination by some members of the Board to discredit Dr. Mallings. Tess had not believed their attitude was so bitter until she saw them in Dr. Mallings's office that morning. Their reasons for wanting to ruin his reputation were totally unworthy, and John was now telling Tess that she had helped them in their scheme; that it would succeed because of her.

John's father came home just then. He beamed at Tess.

"You're the woman of the hour, Nurse! You're the toast of most of the right-thinking people of this town tonight. We'll get things straight at that hospital now, thanks to you."

Tess did not enjoy her dinner, or her evening with the wealthy

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Dobbie family. - The hostility she encountered at the hospital was unbearable, and now the extravagant cordiality she was receiving was even harder to bear. Every smile, every word of praise, made her hate herself more and more.

She left them early. Dreading it, she returned to the hospital, and when she entered her room she found a note from Jane.

"Dear Tess; Just a warning. Dr. Brown came to the quarters to see you after you left. He said you had reported sick and he was going to prescribe. He was pretty annoyed that you'd gone out. I reckon you'll have to toe the carpet over it tomorrow."

CHAPTER V

Tess had had no sleep. Her visit to the Dobbie's had not been restful. When she read Jane's note she should have been busy in the ward making sure that all patients were settling down for the night. The day ahead and the night following, would be extremely trying, and her health would suffer if she failed to get some rest. She got ready for bed but knew better than to try to force herself to sleep.

She let her thoughts run without resistance. She thought of the tempestuous show of passion she had unloosed on John that afternoon, the shower of kisses, the clinging of her arms around him, her tears which wet her face and salted her lips while she kissed him. John always responded in a satisfactory manner at such times, returning her kisses with enough warmth, but not too much passion on his own part. When she had exhausted her stored-up emotions and healing tears were flowing, he always held her tight in his arms, saying nothing, offering his handkerchief to dry her eyes. It had been the same on this occasion, with only a little added warmth due to his delight at her action at the enquiry.

And yet, in a little while, she had wanted to escape from his presence. The longer she remained there, and the more John's family showed their friendliness, the more unbearable it became.

So Tess began to wonder, as she lay on her bed with her eyes closed, if she may have stopped loving John Dobbie, or if she had ever loved him in real truth. Or if he had ever loved her.

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She was grateful to him. She had never before questioned herself in this way. She and John were restrained except when she was gripped by emotions, and, even then, his response never embarrassed her. At most times he was merely a pleasant companion who was aware of her unusual beauty, and seemed to find her companionship and trust sufficient. Though she found it necessary to release her emotions in his arms at times, she had felt much the same with Jane before she knew John Dobbie, and Jane had been more embarrassed by it than John was. Of course she had never thought she was in love with Jane. It was nothing like those unfortunate attachments between women that she had heard about, so there was really no proof that she loved John.

Nor could she blame him for adopting his father's attitude toward Dr. Malling. When they congratulated her for helping them in their vendetta, it distressed her, but she blamed herself. It was that which seemed to shut her off from John, made her want to get away from him, away from his approval, because it made her feel guilty.

She was getting drowsy at last, slipping into a half-sleep while she told herself that the good thing about her affair with John Dobbie was its lack of urgency. No one was pressing her to announce their engagement. He rarely mentioned getting married. He had his position in the mining company to prepare for; he neither did nor said anything that might cause him to interrupt his preparation by getting married before he was ready.

It was a comforting thought, and Tess drifted into a sound sleep with it in her mind.

She was summoned to the Matron's office next morning. She was more calm, more rested, and went to face Matron without much nervousness.

"Well, Nurse Walden," Matron said sternly. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"I simply couldn't have got through my duties last night," Tess told her.

"But you could go out driving with your boy-friend. If you were ill, you should have remained in your room. If you weren't ill, you should have reported for duty."

"I didn't say I was ill."

"The rule holds, no matter what you told me on the telephone. Illness is the only ground on which you can refuse to report for duty, and then it must be confirmed by a doctor. You went off somewhere, and Dr. Brown couldn't examine you."

"I'd had no sleep. I was in a terrible state because of what happened yesterday. I simply had to get away."

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"Well, I've got no proof there was anything wrong with you except that you wanted a few hours with John Dobbie. I can't tolerate such behaviour by my staff, Nurse. I hope you understand that. One more incident like this, and I'll have to dismiss you."

"But you must know . . ."

"That will be all, Nurse. You've had your warning."

Of course Matron knew why Tess could not face the ward and its duties the previous night, and why she had been unable to get any sleep. Matron knew of the combined attack on Tess by the other nurses, for she had come and put a stop to it. She needed no doctor's examination to satisfy her that Tess was telling the sober truth when she said it was impossible for her to carry out her duties that night.

Tess knew that every nurse slips at times on small details which can be used to discredit her if the Matron, or the sister in charge, is looking for something. For a few moments, Tess stood motionless before the Matron; she was tempted to offer her resignation on the spot.

She decided to wait, to think about it, to see how the other nurses behaved now that a day had passed.

As Tess left the office, she encountered Dr. Malling in the hallway. She nodded blankly, fearing a rebuff, but he stopped her.

"Will you come to my office for a moment, Nurse?"

Tess went with him, saying nothing, waiting for the further recrimination she thought might be coming. Yesterday she would not have feared it from Dr. Malling, but today he was being attacked by people who wished to be rid of him because he had insisted on protecting the health of men who worked in the mines; and she had gone straight from the Board meeting to have dinner with one of his attackers.

In his office, Dr. Malling gave her a chair. He looked at her keenly and asked, "How are you today? You were ill yesterday, weren't you?"

"No, doctor, I wasn't sick."

"Dr. Brown was sent to your room to examine you. He said you had gone out. I thought . . ."

"I went out because I couldn't stand the hospital with everyone hating me and insulting me for answering those questions the way I did yesterday."

"Were they?" he asked thoughtfully. "I see . . ."

"You must be more annoyed over it than the nurses," Tess suggested.

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"Me? Why, of course not. Sister Falcon meant well, but she put herself in an impossible position. It never pays to lie about a thing like this. I certainly would have been very disappointed if you hadn't told the truth."

"Then why did you call me in here?"

"I thought you were ill, and had dodged treatment for some reason. Was there nothing wrong with your health? Are you sure?"

"I hadn't been able to sleep, but that was because of all the things that had been said. I was terribly upset, but I don't think you'd call it an illness. The nurses were insulting me, and I knew I wouldn't be able to do my work properly."

"Are you all right now?"

"I think so," Tess said. "I'm not sure. I may give Matron my resignation later today. She thinks it's all my fault if the Board decides to take action against you."

"It's unfortunate that Mr. Amos was making so much trouble for you on that particular night," Dr. Malling said.

"What do you think the Board will do?" Tess asked impulsively.

"I can't quite tell yet. I'm still hoping they'll be reasonable."

"I'll feel terrible if they're not. I — I had no idea when I told Mrs. Amos . . ."

"You shouldn't blame yourself, Nurse. I'm sure any other nurse in the circumstances would have said what you did. Now, if you feel the strain on your nerves is getting too great, call me. Will you promise? Come straight to me. That's my speciality, you know."

"Yes, I'll promise, but I — I never had trouble with my nerves until the other night when I couldn't sleep."

"You may have without knowing what was bothering you."

"I suppose so."

"You don't go on duty till tonight, do you?"

"I'm not sure I'll go on duty. The way the nurses have been acting I may decide to resign."

"Have some more rest. Think about it calmly. You shouldn't let them drive you to hasty action."

Tess left him with a feeling of more confidence than she had experienced since the Gillen incident. The hostility of the others seemed to matter far less now that she had talked to Dr. Malling. She braced herself as she went to the quarters, but the two or three nurses she passed were intent on what they were doing and appeared not to notice Tess. She reached her room without any incident and lay down on her bed.

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Everyone was blaming her for injuring Dr. Malling, yet Dr. Malling was the one person who felt no resentment at all. Tess wondered if he knew of her association with John Dobbie. Did he know that the nurses were accusing Tess of scheming the whole thing to please the Dobbies and their friends? Matron knew. She would surely tell the doctor.

In any case, he knew that she was being persecuted over the incident. He had suggested that the strain on her nerves might become worse. She supposed it was nervous strain that kept her awake the other night. He had said that she may have had trouble with her nerves without knowing it; and she remembered now the operation he had performed on a woman who had thought she was merely suffering from a bad case of indigestion. There had been other cases in which a disorder of the nerves was hardly suspected.

She went to the dining-room for dinner when the time for dinner arrived. The nurses already there said nothing to her. Jane was still asleep, so Tess was alone. She was relieved at first by the failure of the girls to say anything. She had feared more insults and sneers, but she was saved these. She supposed that Matron had put a stop to that. By the time she had finished her meal, however, she wondered if this silence was easier to bear than the abuse of yesterday.

Jane woke up a little after Tess returned from the dining-room. She was very subdued for a little while, and then she came out with what was worrying her.

"The girls made it up among themselves that nobody would talk to you, Tess. They told me about it after they'd made it up."

"Did they tell you you couldn't speak to your own roommate?"

"They said what happened in the room was none of their business, but if I talked to you anywhere else they'd all cut me."

"So that's it. Well, you'd better do as they say. I found out just how it feels to sit in the dining room with girls I've worked with for months all around me and feel as alone as if I was marooned on an island."

"But we don't have to stay here, Tess! We can leave. We've both finished our training. There are plenty of other hospitals wanting nurses."

"I've been thinking about that."

"Or you could leave today and marry John Dobbie. He wants to marry you, doesn't he?"

Tess thought that John did mean to marry her when he had his overseer's ticket. She thought he might marry her at once if she begged him to.

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"I'm not sure about marrying John," Tess said.

"You mean you're not sure you want to marry him?"

"He . . . he's so delighted about the trouble I've caused Dr. Mallings. And I didn't want to, Jane. I'd do anything to undo it if there was a way I could. You see?"

"But you love him, don't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"A thing like this shouldn't come in the way. If he wants to marry you, this is a good time to bring him to the point."

"If he wants to marry me, I shouldn't have to bring him to the point."

"But we can't stay here, Tess. There are only a couple of little private hospitals, and they don't need nurses. We'd have to go away somewhere, and you wouldn't see John. You might lose out."

"Well, I'm going to report for duty tonight. I'll see how I get through it. And you'd better ignore me, like the others, till we decide."

"I will not ignore you! I'll let them know they can't boss me around."

Tess reported for duty prepared for a very bad time with Sister Falcon. She held her head high, her face defiant, and said, "I'm reporting for duty, Sister."

"So I see. You know your duties. Now that we've got a new Medical Superintendent . . ."

"What? They didn't . . .?"

"They've suspended Dr. Mallings. They decided to cancel his appointment and make a report to the Association. Dr. Brown is Acting-Super."

Tess said nothing more. Until that moment she had not been able to believe the Board would actually take this step. She found herself unable to think clearly about it. She even felt a little sympathy for the nurses who ignored her, gave her glum looks, and did everything possible to make her uncomfortable.

Dr. Mallings may have left the hospital with a woman that night. His reason for leaving may have been as inexcusable as it appeared, but the hospital, and the town, would lose a great deal when he was forced to leave. To seize on an incident such as that, one which could occur frequently to scores of hospital doctors with no ill effects, and to use it to try to ruin Mallings's reputation, was an act of sheer malice.

Tess went through the night with hardly anything said to

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her except by the patients, and by Sister Falcon, who gave her the necessary instructions in the fewest possible words. Long before it was her time to go off duty, Tess knew she must resign and leave as soon as possible.

She had breakfast and then went to the telephone and got John on the line.

"I called you to say I'm resigning from the hospital, John. I'll go to Matron as soon as she can see me and tell her."

"You say your're resigning? You say your're resigning? But it'll be all right now. The Board sacking Malling, you know, and . . ."

"I know. That's one reason why I don't want to stay."

"Don't be silly! Dr. Brown'll make things easy for you if Dad asks him."

"You don't seem to understand, John. I didn't want to do anything against Dr. Malling. I admire him. It's a terrible thing to lose a doctor like him because of a few words I let slip. I'd feel guilty all the time if I stayed."

"Look, Tess. Come into town and I'll meet you and we'll have a cup of coffee and a talk. You don't want to do anything rash."

"I'll have to get a bit of sleep first," Tess said. "Shall we make it at three o'clock?"

She had decided to leave. What John said had not shaken her decision, and, that being decided, she was able to sleep. She got up and met John as they had arranged and he took her to the most pleasant coffee lounge in town. He commenced at once to justify the action of the Board in getting rid of Dr. Malling.

"You can't worry your head about a man like that, Tess?" he argued. "He's no good. He's worse than no good. Why, damn it, a doctor in charge of a hospital! And he leaves patients to die for lack of medical attention while he runs off for an hour or so with some loose tart!"

"But how do you know? He wouldn't say who he was with."

"And he had a damned good reason. I know for a fact that he went off with a woman, met her on the hospital porch and drove off with her."

"It mightn't have been what you think, John."

"Then why wouldn't he say who he was with? It's a safe bet it's some married woman, one of his patients, and he's afraid to name her for fear her husband will have a piece of him. It's his business if he wants to play around with his female patients,

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but when a patient in hospital is dying and he's off in some dirty room with . . ."

"You're imagining it! You don't know a thing about it and you've no idea the kind of man Dr. Mallings is."

Tess spoke heatedly, hardly thinking. She could not endure hearing the things John was saying. She was unable to think about what he said. She had to deny it and her anger spurred John to anger.

"We knew the kind of interfering fraud he is a long time ago. Poking his nose into the mining business! Do you know he forced the mines in this town to throw close on sixty thousand pounds down the drain? All that machinery for laying dust, pumping air into the drives! Damn it, Tess, these mines were working all right for years . . ."

"And that's all you've really got against Dr. Mallings!" Tess hissed. "You've been murdering miners for years, poisoning their lungs with your filthy dust just to save the money! And now you're trying to get even with him for forcing you to run your businesses decently!"

"Why are you standing up for him? Are you hoping you'll be the next girl he runs off with to his . . .?"

"You dingo!" Tess hissed. "He's the best doctor this town ever had. That's why I'm standing up for him. And everybody knows your company, and the rest of them, were breaking the law until Dr. Mallings forced you to comply. If you're complaining about that you're no better than criminals!"

The waitress came with their coffee and they held back their angry words. When she had gone, John sipped his coffee moodily. Tess watched him and wondered how he could have said such things, how she could have blamed him for what was the policy of the companies run by others.

"I'm sorry I said that about you," John said after a moment. "It was a rotten thing to say."

"You don't really think that, do you?"

"No, Tess, I don't think it. I just did my block."

"And I didn't mean to blame you over the dust in the mines. I lost my temper when you started talking about Dr. Mallings as if there wasn't a good thing in him. You see, I've worked with him. I've assisted him with some of his operations. I've seen the near-miracles he's performed. You can't help placing a special value on a man when you see him doing so much good."

"Well, some of the members of the Board reckon it's all a lot of ballyhoo. They reckon he just boomed himself up and got a lot of people to believe it."

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"They don't know what they're talking about. I do. I read the case histories sent to him by doctors who've never met him. I know what some of these people have suffered before they came here, and not on Dr. Malling's word."

"Well, the Board's got a right to decide and they've already done it. Let's not fight about it again."

He switched the talk to other things in order not to fight. Tess had no wish to argue with him and was glad to avoid acrimony. The result was that they parted without saying anything about her intention to resign. He had not even realised that it would mean she would leave town, go where he might not be able to see her.

When she returned to the hospital, she knew more certainly than before that she could not face the situation. She found Jane in the room and told her she had decided to leave.

"I don't really blame the other girls," Tess said. "Now that they've sacked Dr. Malling, I'm as angry about it as they are."

"But it wasn't you! It was Mrs. Amos and those old crooks on the Board."

"I gave them the weapon they needed. I'd have to go around the hospital feeling like a traitor. I'm going down to give Matron my resignation now."

"Not on your own, young lady! You can't get away from me like that."

"But you don't have to leave with me, Jane."

"I don't have to, but I'm going to."

They found Matron in her office looking as grim as they had ever seen her. They told her they were leaving, and wanted to be released as soon as possible.

"I expected something of the sort," Matron said. "I hope you don't expect to leave at once."

"I'd like to," Tess said.

"Well, you can't. I'll have to see how I can arrange my staff. I'll let you know tomorrow when you can leave. I wouldn't advise you to pack up and go without my consent. Remember, you're supposed to give a month's notice, but I'll forget that."

"It isn't just a whim, Matron," Tess said. "You know the reason."

"We won't discuss that. I'll tell you tomorrow when you can be released."

So Tess had to report once again to Sister Falcon. The sister had the local newspaper spread before her when Tess reported. She said nothing, but pointed to the announcement she had been reading.

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A public meeting was being called for the following night. The miners, and some of the business people of the town, were calling the meeting to protest against the action of the Board in suspending Dr. Malling.

"There'll be some straight talk at that meeting," Sister Falcon said. "If Dr. Bacon resigns over this business, the hospital will be in a nice fix."

"Well, I've resigned over it, if that will give you any comfort," Tess said.

"You had better not go to the meeting. It wouldn't be healthy for you there," Sister Falcon replied grimly.

CHAPTER VI

The next day was full of uncertainty for Tess. She had resigned, but she had not decided where she would go when she left. Matron had made no attempt to dissuade her, but neither had she been able to say when Tess could leave. Tess had quarrelled with John Dobbie and had been reconciled; but the question of her future relations with him was more uncertain than anything else.

Tess endured the hostile silence which surrounded her as she went off duty in the morning and had breakfast and made her way to the quarters. She could no longer even resent it, for her own idle words had resulted in disaster. She went to bed and slept well, but awoke only a little after noon. The one need she felt on awakening was the need to get her own plans made, her own thoughts and emotions straight.

She could think of nowhere in the town where she would be able to think without distraction, so she dressed in a sunfrock and took her beach-bag and went by bus to the nearest beach, twenty miles away. It was a week-day. There were not many on the bus and none who knew Nurse Tess Walden.

She lay on the beach entirely alone with only the sea gulls and the sound of the surf to take her mind off her personal problems.

The most pressing question was where to go, what to do when she left the hospital. There were other mining towns not far away. No doubt she could go to a hospital in one of these

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places. Her surroundings would be much the same, the hospital routine similar because the hospitals were of much the same size. That would be the easiest thing to do, but Tess knew she would still feel much as she did now. She would be so close to the present events that she could hardly forget them. There were country towns further afield and there was always Sydney.

Sydney lured her, as it does every farm girl or boy, but, as with others, it frightened her. She had seen some of the big hospitals of the city, but only from the outside. She knew that she would feel lost if she entered one of these places, even if it was only to apply for a position. No matter how long she worked in one she would never know more than a fraction of the staff personally. If Jane went with her, as she would, Tess would feel less alone. She would have one friend, the assurance of companionship, while she learned her way along the miles of corridors and acres of ward-space.

That would be the surest way to forget her guilt over Dr. Mallings' dismissal and to avoid the anger that surrounded her now.

But in Sydney she would not see John Dobbie. No doubt he would come to the city sometimes and they would meet, but it would be rare. She would almost certainly end their association by going to the city.

She had never thought a great deal about her relations with John. At their first acquaintance, when first she let him kiss her, she had thought about it a great deal; but she had thought rather about what kind of man he was, about whether or not she could permit his kisses without having to halt his further advances, about whether or not he was a man who would refuse to be halted. That problem was solved and she found him serious-minded, always attentive to her, very proud of being seen in the company of a girl so lovely. She had been careful to do nothing that might complicate their relations or spoil his own plans or make her wary of him. After that there seemed to be nothing that called for much consideration.

The quarrel over Dr. Mallings was the first real fight they had ever had. She could understand that John would naturally absorb the attitude of the older men with whom he lived and worked, but now she began to ask herself if that might also have some bearing on his attitude to her. Did it mean that the interests and objectives of the top men in the mines were more important to John than anything else? If he would willingly sacrifice the health of the miners because it suited the owners' interests, might he not also sacrifice something more personal?

Would John turn away from Tess Walden and reject her if

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something she said or did interfered with the plans of John's father instead of helping them along?

It brought her face-to-face with the question of whether or not there was any real love between them.

Tess thought of the times when she had been overwhelmed by a need to unload her emotion-charged heart on John. At such times it would seem that she loved him passionately, and yet she could think quite calmly about going away. She felt no pang of loss when the prospect of ending their association presented itself.

She was grateful for his restraint at such times of emotion, but she wondered if that restraint would have been possible in one who loved her. She wondered if he could have gone on so patiently avoiding talk of a wedding which would upset his plans for a career.

Lying there on the sand, undisturbed by distractions, the truth about these emotional storms came to her. At least, part of the truth was clear.

She was compelled to seek his arms, was compelled to kiss him in a kind of frenzy, but the emotions she was releasing, the storm she was unleashing on John, had little to do with him. They were not emotions aroused by him; they were accumulated passions aroused by other things. It was the same as when, in childhood, she had found the need at times to run to her mother and make a similar demonstration. All children do that. It seems to be an expression of great love for the mother, but it is hardly connected with the child's feelings for her mother.

Tess found this truth puzzling, and a little frightening. It could mean that she had never been more than mildly attracted to John Dobbie, and it hinted at hidden problems she could not understand.

She forced her thoughts back to the question of what to do when she left the hospital. In a moment, she was wondering what Dr. Mallings would do now that he was being expelled by the Board. Would he go to Sydney, where his reputation was already known? Or did he have a preference for smaller hospitals?

Tess knew that, if Amos and Dobbie had their way, he would be barred from practising medicine anywhere. Was it possible that selfish men, driven by malice, could wreck the career of a doctor of Mallings's ability?

They said the woman he was with was very pretty. Tess wondered if it was someone out of Dr. Mallings's past, someone from whom he wanted to escape. Tess tried to picture the girl, to imagine one who could lure Dr. Mallings away from his duty. She pictured some vaguely beautiful, even more vaguely

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voluptuous, woman full of wile and evil intentions. Even so, she could not picture Malling being deceived by such a woman.

But he had gone somewhere with her. Some little-known flat fitted up in erotic luxury? Were there such flats in this town? And, if so, if he did go to some such "love-nest" with the woman, what did they do? Was it what the members of the Board suggested?

Tess was drowsy, and her mind constructed the scene—the broad couch piled with silk cushions, the clinging kisses of the couple on the couch, the ardent caresses, the sighs. . . .

She opened her eyes suddenly and sat up. The girl on the couch was herself. In her half-sleep, she had taken the place of the vague beauty she had imagined. It had been Tess Walden who was being kissed, caressed, embraced by the doctor.

The idea alarmed her. She got to her feet. She walked up the nearly empty beach, trying to decide what to do, trying to make up her mind that she really loved John Dobbie, and should not let a disagreement come between them; but her thoughts kept going back to the questions whether Dr. Malling would be disqualified, and what he would do if he was, and whether or not a doctor should be disqualified for absenting himself for a time in the company of a woman.

When she got on the bus to return to the hospital, she had decided nothing. She thought she would go to Sydney, but she could not feel it was a decision.

Jane jumped up as soon as Tess came into the room.

"Where did you get to? Matron wanted us in her office at three, but I couldn't tell her where you were. I reckon she's going to tell us when we can leave this rotten dump."

"I went to the beach to be alone and think. Will you ring Matron now, and ask her if we can see her?"

Jane went to the telephone. She came back in a moment to say Matron would see them at once.

"She's got something she wants to get off her chest, I'll bet," Jane said. "Come on and get it over with."

Matron Kinkead did not lecture them, however. She merely sat very erect, and told them she had arranged her staff so that Tess and Jane could leave at once, if they wished. Neither need report for duty again.

"I suppose you'll want us to move out of the quarters tonight?" Tess asked.

"I'd like you to move when you can. It's a bit late now to move tonight. I want you to understand that I'm releasing you without notice only because I think it's better for all of us. You understand why, I'm sure."

"Yes, Matron, I . . ."

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Dr. Brown interrupted Tess by coming into Matron's office without knocking.

"Oh, I'm sorry to interrupt, Matron, but . . ."

"You may be Medical Superintendent for the time being, Doctor, but I'm still Matron. I'll thank you to knock before entering my office in future."

"I'm sorry, but I've got a patient who demands a consultation with Dr. Malling. It's so difficult, Matron. The Board would be . . ."

"A patient has a right to demand a consultation by another doctor, hasn't he?"

"Of course, of course. It's just that . . . Well, for one thing, I don't know where I can locate Dr. Malling. He may have left town."

"Would you like me to get him for you?"

"If you will, Matron. He may not like coming here in the circumstances."

"Shall I tell him it's at your request?"

"Tell him I'm calling him in at the patient's request."

Dr. Brown went out, and Matron told Jane and Tess they could stay at the quarters till the morning.

Leaving Matron's office, Jane said, "Huh! Old Brownie has got his nose out of joint, hasn't he?"

"He seemed scared of the Board."

"I'll say he's scared. That's just the kind of Super those characters like. I'll bet Brown's been looking for a chance to put the knife into Dr. Malling all along."

"And I did it for him. You know, Jane, I don't blame the girls for hating me. One reason I want to get away is because I'll hate myself the longer I stay here."

They went to their quarters, and Tess started packing her things ready for the morning. Jane went to the recreation room. She said she'd pack up later. She'd been sleeping most of the day.

After about an hour, Jane came into the room to pass on gossip from the wards she had heard in the recreation room.

"Vi was there when Dr. Malling had his consultation with the patient. It's some woman who's got terrible pains around the heart. Brown diagnosed some heart disease, but Malling reckons it's a nerve lesion due to a back injury. He said heart disease was completely ruled out. He used his special instruments, and traced the exact point of the lesion. He prescribed neuro surgery."

"Dr. Brown couldn't do an operation like that," Tess said.

"And the woman knows it. She said she'd consent only if Dr. Malling operates. So, what do you know! Brown had to

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agree. The doctor they kicked out yesterday is back in the operating theatre today."

Jane returned to the recreation room, but she was back in five minutes. "Telephone, Tess. Matron asking for you."

Tess went to the telephone, very puzzled. Matron's voice sounded displeased as she said, "I'm sorry, Nurse, but I'll have to ask you if you'll assist at an operation at once. It came up unexpectedly."

"Very well, Matron. I'll be at the theatre as soon as I've changed into my uniform."

Tess was excited at this call. She was not only excited, she was elated. And yet it seemed merely that Matron had not provided for an operation that night when she re-assigned her staff to allow for the absence of Jane and Tess. She hurried into her uniform, and ran down to the operating theatre. Her cheeks must have been glowing when she went into the theatre and faced Dr. Malling.

"You were quick, Nurse. I thought you'd be on duty, but Matron said she'd relieved you tonight. Your health's all right, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'm quite all right. I'll just wash my hands."

She turned to the wash-basin because she felt her cheeks burning for some reason she could not understand.

"It's my fault that you were called on duty at this hour," Dr. Malling said. "You're the best assistant I've had in these nerve operations, and I demanded you."

Tess could find no answer. She busied herself with the rest of the preparations. Dr. Bacon came in to administer the anaesthetic, and frowned at Tess. He had not dropped his attitude toward her. Dr. Malling noticed it, however.

"Nurse Walden is here at my request, Doctor," he said. "She was called back on duty to assist me."

Dr. Bacon mumbled something which Tess could not catch, but she got no more scowls from him.

The patient was brought in contorted with pain, but she smiled when she saw Dr. Malling at the operating table.

This was an operation similar to the one in which a severe stomach disorder was involved. A scar that was hardly healed, and a considerable area of bruised tissue, showed where the patient had received a severe blow high on her back. It had been quite recent. Before making an incision, Dr. Malling probed the bruised area with his fingers. Dr. Bacon, as keenly interested as before, watched and looked at Malling enquiringly.

"A lesion from a blow of this type is extremely rare," Malling told him. "I think there must be a splintered rib. Possibly nothing more than pressure on the nerve."

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He made a rather large incision. He bared two ribs near their junction with the spinal column. He nodded when he saw the sliver of bone from one rib pointing inward like a tiny dagger. Thereafter, it was minute work which Tess could not see, and which she would have had no time to follow if she could have seen it. Dr. Malling worked with intent patience, but he called for a quick succession of his special instruments. It was half an hour or more before he returned to the splintered rib, repaired it and closed the initial incision.

When the patient was returned to the ward, Dr. Bacon excused himself. "It's my night in attendance. I'd better do the rounds," he said.

Tess and Dr. Malling went to the wash-room together.

"I thought you might have left town," Tess said as she took off her white mask.

"Not yet. There'll be an on-the-spot investigation by someone from the Association. I'll wait for that before deciding what to do."

"I've resigned, you know. Matron gave me an immediate release. That's why I wasn't on duty tonight."

Dr. Malling showed immediate interest. The glow in his eyes which she always saw there after one of these special operations was directed on her with great intensity.

"Did the staff make it impossible for you?" he asked.

"Partly that. But it was partly because I feel so guilty. I didn't have a bad intention of any kind when I told Mrs. Amos we were looking for you, but I can't tell you how distressed I am over the effect it had."

"Of course. Everyone in the hospital is distressed, but what you said had little to do with it, Nurse. Some members of the Board were determined to remove me. They'd have found another excuse if you hadn't supplied one innocently."

"It doesn't alter the fact that I supplied it. No one else, except Jane, seems to believe I did it innocently."

"They're angry. They have to find a scapegoat. What are you planning to do?"

"I haven't decided. Jane's leaving with me. I think we'll go to a hotel, have a rest for a few days and talk it over."

"Yes, a rest will do you good. Thanks for helping me tonight."

They left the operating theatre together. As they were going through the entrance, three nurses came up the steps.

"Dr. Malling!" one of them said. "You should have been at the meeting. They carried a resolution demanding your reinstatement. Less than half a dozen voted against it."

"No, I'd have been out of place there," Dr. Malling smiled.

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"You should have heard the speakers going for the Board. Everybody knows they only did it through spite. You'd know how the ordinary people in the town feel about it if you'd been there."

"But it's nothing to do with my work as a doctor," Dr. Malling said. "It's a fight between the miners and the mine-owners. You see? If my duty as a doctor had forced me to do something the miners didn't like, they'd be against me."

"Well, they're all with you now. I hope Tess Walden has seen what damage she did."

"Nurse Walden wasn't to blame," the doctor said. "But she's resigned from the staff because a few words she let drop were used against the hospital. You may as well know that I have a great respect for her."

CHAPTER VII

Dr. Mallings's words warmed Tess, sent her to her room with a lighter heart and happier spirit than she had experienced for a long time. They wiped from her mind a good deal of the feeling of guilt that had plagued her, and they gave her courage that she needed.

She told Jane of it, and Jane drew a quick breath, then looked at Tess steadily for a moment. Then she said, "Now, that's funny."

"What's funny about it? It just means that he doesn't think I intended to cause any trouble."

"Yeah, I know. I just said it's funny."

She refused to say anything more. They talked about their plans, and Jane agreed it might be best to go to one of the better hotels in town and take a day or two to decide what they should do.

They got a room together at the hotel. To nurses who, for years, had duties pressing on them, it seemed a little strange to have nothing to do. They went out and did some shopping, then came back and lounged on the broad upstairs verandah. The local paper had a report of the public meeting which demanded Dr. Mallings's reinstatement, and everyone was talking about it.

Tess had a shower just before lunch and Jane was in their room when she returned to it.

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"What do you think!" she said. "How can people be so rotten? I got to talking to some people who don't know we're nurses. And do you know the story that's going around?"

"Something more about me?"

"I thought the nurses were bad enough, but this is worse. They reckon that old man Dobbie and Mr. Amos got hold of you through John. They say it was a bargain that you could marry John if you'd make some statement they could use to kick Dr. Malling out and get him expelled from the Association."

"There's nothing about that in the paper," Tess said.

"No, it wasn't mentioned at the meeting, but people are kind of whispering it to each other. The story they've got is that you told a pack of lies about the Super, and both Matron and Sister Falcon denied them flatly. See? According to this story, it was a put-up job and the Board knew you were lying, but they took your word against the word of Matron and the sister."

"They're silly! I didn't even know that Dr. Malling had left the hospital that night. It was he who told them he was away for an hour."

"Well, that's what they're all saying, Tess. Everybody seems to believe it. I suppose it's because you've been going out with John Dobbie for so long, and no engagement announced . . ."

"So now if I did marry him they'd say it proved this story is true!"

"It's the most cowardly thing I ever heard of," Jane said.

Tess had already learned what it was like working among nurses all of whom showed her plainly that they despised her. She had found it more than she could endure, and now she realised that she was surrounded by an entire population most of whom despised her just as passionately. Wherever she went, in the hotel, or out on to the street, she knew people were pointing to her after she passed and repeating the shameful story. By the middle of the afternoon she was so distressed that she was afraid of an utter breakdown, which would direct still more attention to her.

"I can't stand it here, Jane," she said. "And this story's sure to spread to the other mining towns. I'm going to pack up and go to Sydney tomorrow. It's the only place where I'll have a chance of getting away from it."

"Well, don't tell anybody. We'll just go and get on the train."

"And I won't go down to the dining-room. I'd be sure to hear somebody whispering behind my back and make a scene."

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"Right-oh. I'll go out and buy something and we'll have it in the room."

Tess felt a little better when this was decided. When a housemaid came and told her she was wanted on the telephone she was able to go with her head up and ignore all the people she passed on the way to the office.

It was John Dobbie. His voice sounded annoyed.

"Why didn't you tell me you had left the hospital? I've been trying all over the place to get you."

"Matron let me go without notice. I didn't expect to get away so soon."

"Well, look, Tess, I have to see you. Will you come out to our place for dinner?"

Tess was not able to answer him at once. The need to unload her overcharged emotions on his shoulder was great, while the slanders she had just heard about herself forced her to hesitate.

"They're saying terrible things about us," she said. "I don't know if I ought to . . ."

"All lies! Are you going to disown your friends every time some fool tells a lie about you?"

Going to dinner with John would add nothing to the slanders, she realised. It was already well known that they were constant companions. And dinner at the Dobbies would be better than a few sandwiches in her room.

"Of course that'd be silly," she said. "Yes, I'll come. I do want to see you."

"Right. I'll call around in half an hour."

Tess tried to think about this meeting, which would be their last for a long time. She tried to recall what she had decided about their relations when she was lazing on the beach, but she had reached a point of emotional pressure that prevented her from thinking clearly. She wanted to cry, but she wanted a shoulder to cry on, a person whom she liked to kiss without stint; she wanted John's arms around her as she let go her accumulated feelings. She could not think beyond that.

He came to the hotel and upstairs to Tess's room. Jane was there, but it made no difference. Tess threw herself into his arms as she had into her mother's arms as a child. She kissed him frantically through her tears, while Jane watched with an uneasy look in her eyes.

The storm passed quickly and Tess felt more calm. She bathed her face, renewed her lip-stick and went to John's car.

"Your friend seemed to think you were putting on a good show," John said as they started for his place.

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"She knows I get like that when I've had a lot of worries."

"There are blokes who'd think you were giving them the green light."

"But you know it doesn't mean anything like that, don't you?"

"Of course. I didn't mean it that way."

They had never gone further than this in talking about Tess's emotional floods. Tess herself found them too puzzling to talk about, and John seemed to take them as a tribute to him in some way.

His father had not come home yet when they got to the Dobbie home and John took her on to the verandah, where he gave her a cold drink.

"You read about that public meeting last night, I suppose," he said.

"Yes, and I heard about it from some girls who were there."

"The local hotheads are stirring up a lot of feeling against the Board, you know. They can do it because nobody has been told the real reason for Mallings's dismissal. They can tell all the lies around the place and get away with it."

"Some of the things they're saying are terrible, but I don't see anything we can do to stop it."

"You could stop it, Tess. All you'd have to do is go to the local newspaper and tell them about Mallings leaving the hospital and you not being able to find him when a patient was in danger of dying for lack of attention."

"I couldn't do that, John. The proceedings at the enquiry were confidential. Even you weren't supposed to know what occurred."

"That's all right so long as the other side plays fair. But the way they're working people up, spreading rumours, setting the whole town against Dad and Amos . . ."

"Besides, the Medical Association has to investigate it, haven't they? I'd be . . ."

"It'll help their investigations along if the town knows what kind of a fraud Mallings is."

"But he's not a fraud! Didn't we argue about that before? I don't know where he went that night, but I know that he's one of the finest doctors this town ever had."

"That may be, but he went off with some woman that night. No doctor can be trusted who'd leave patients dying while he . . ."

"That's for the Association to decide," Tess said. "I'd be as bad as people say I am if I started revealing what happened at the Board's enquiry."

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"But a man like that has to be exposed. Even if the Association lets him go on practising, his character has to be exposed."

"You should know me better than to think I'd do that," Tess said. "So far as I know he's got a fine character, except for that one thing, and nobody knows why he went out that night."

"And he won't tell. That's the point. If it wasn't something he was ashamed of . . . Anyway, I've arranged for a reporter from the paper to come along pretty soon. I told him I'd get you to . . ."

"You had no right to, John! I won't say a thing to him."

Someone rang the doorbell and John looked out. "That's him now," he said. "Don't let us down. Don't play the game of these troublemakers."

The newspaper man was middle-aged and his manner gave Tess the impression that he was more than a mere reporter. In view of the intense interest in the affair, the top man of the editorial staff had probably come for the interview. The paper had reported the public meeting and what was said there. Amos and Dobbie and the other members of the Board could not come out openly and reveal the proceedings at the Board meeting. They could circulate rumours, but they wanted to get their view into the paper without convicting themselves of bad faith. So Tess was being asked to do it.

She felt that she was being pushed into it, and she was angry when she was introduced to Mr. Natly.

"Nurse Walden was on duty in Mrs. Gillen's ward the night she had the bad turn," John said. "She knows why Dr. Malling was suspended."

"I'm not going to talk about it," Tess said. "You've no right to ask me."

"There was a great deal said at the meeting," Mr. Natly said. "Since it has been made a public issue, the public has a right to know the full facts."

"Why don't you ask Sister Falcon?" Tess nearly shouted. "She was in charge of the hospital staff that night. She was in the ward. Go and argue with her about it, but leave me alone!"

"But there was an enquiry by the Board, Nurse. It's being rumoured that your report of the incident was the decisive factor."

"That wicked rumour!" Tess shouted. "Do you know the rest of it? Will you tell Mr. Dobbie the rest of it?"

Natly blushed. He was very uneasy in the face of her anger, and there was no doubt that he knew the rest of the rumour which was so insulting to Tess.

"We're only try to be fair, Nurse," he said. "You know some facts that would . . ."

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"I'll only say one thing, Mr. Natly, and then you can stop questioning me. If the Board had any reason at all for its action, it wasn't anything I said. It was what Dr. Malling himself told them. Why don't you interview him?"

"Eh? Do you mean that seriously?"

"I do, and it's all I'll say."

"Just one more question, please. Can we say that you agree the Board had no option but to dismiss Dr. Malling?"

"You should know better than to ask a nurse that question. Don't you know that a nurse's opinion of a doctor's capacity is of no value at all? Don't you know that one thing a nurse is forbidden to do is express opinions publicly about the professional character of the doctors she works with?"

"Well, I suppose . . . But Mr. Dobbie gave me to understand . . ."

"Mr. Dobbie had no right to tell you I'd violate the vows of my profession. He may not realise what he was doing, but you do. You know that your question is an insult to my character as a nurse."

"I didn't mean it that way, Nurse."

"Then you'd better look up your book on the ethics of journalism. You have got ethics, haven't you?"

Mr. Natly made no further attempt to get anything from Tess. He left the house feeling very uncomfortable, and John came back with a red face after letting him out.

"You played right into their hands!" he spluttered.

"Into whose hands?"

"All these red-raggers, these hotheads and . . ."

"You mean people who don't want to lose a good doctor just because a few members of the Hospital Board have got a grudge against him?"

"So that's what you think? The members of the Board are solid citizens. They've got the responsibility for the industry that keeps this town prosperous."

"They were breaking the law and destroying the health of the miners for the sake of money. Whatever Dr. Malling may have done it wasn't half as bad as that."

"But they own the mines and have to run them. They can't have Government busybodies poking their noses in and interfering, and half-baked doctors snooping around and making trouble."

"Now you're telling the truth, exactly what they said at the meeting last night. That's why the Board suspended Dr. Malling."

She got to her feet. She had never been so angry with anyone, as she was with John. "I won't stay for dinner," she said. "And don't bother to drive me back. I'd rather walk."

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He stood in a helpless manner at the door, and let her walk down the path and turn toward her hotel.

Tess's temper had cooled and she was in a calmer state when she reached the hotel. However, she found Jane almost in tears.

"You'll never believe it," she said. "This dirty publican reckons we can't stay here. We've got to leave tomorrow morning."

"Well, we're leaving anyway, so it doesn't matter."

"I know, but it . . . it's such an insult!"

"What's behind it?" Tess asked. "Some new slander about me?"

"I don't think it's anything new. They just say that the men won't come here for a drink since we've been here. The publican's afraid he'll lose a few quid in bar-trade."

Tess sat down rather limply. "I had an awful fight with John," she said. "You know, Jane, the things they're saying about me are terrible, and they're all lies, but what they're saying about the Board is true. I found that out tonight."

"Then why can't they take it out on Amos and Dobbie and the rest of them? Why do they have to pick on you?"

"Oh, I don't know! Let's not talk about it any more. We'll be in Sydney this time tomorrow night, and can forget all about it."

Jane went out and bought some sandwiches and they ate them in their room as they had intended before John made his call. They had hardly unpacked anything at the hotel, but they got those few things together ready to pack in the morning before going to the train.

"Those big Sydney hospitals frighten me," Jane said. "I suppose we'll get used to it."

"There are plenty of private hospitals, real small places. We could start in one of them. They're always short of staff."

"Yes, I suppose . . ."

Someone knocked on the door. Tess opened it and found the proprietor there.

"All right," she snapped. "I got your message. We're leaving . . ."

"You're wanted on the phone, Nurse. I didn't come to . . ."

"If it's John Dobbie, I won't speak to him."

"No Nurse, it's Dr. Villers. He insists that you must come to the telephone. He said to tell you it's very important."

"But I hardly know him."

"Yes, he told me. Will you come to the telephone?"

Tess went. She was puzzled and afraid of what she might hear.

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"Is that Nurse Walden?" Dr. Villers asked.

"Yes, but I can't . . ."

"Can you come to see me tonight, Nurse? I can't tell you why I want to see you, not over the telephone. It's really important, Nurse."

"Well, whatever it is, I've made all arrangements to leave for Sydney in the morning. I can't see the use . . ."

"It's still early," Dr. Villers urged. "You can take time to come around here, can't you? I think you'll be glad you did."

"Very well," Tess said. "Are you at your surgery?"

"No, at my private hospital. Will you come at once?"

"All right. I'll leave in ten minutes."

CHAPTER VIII

"Now, what can old Villers want with you?" Jane exclaimed when Tess returned to the room. "I don't need to tell you about him!"

Tess knew as much about Dr. Villers as Jane did. He had a very big private practice, mostly among the miners and their families. He was the most loved doctor in the town by those who consulted him, because, it was said, he added natural human sympathy and understanding to the medical skill with which he treated his patients.

"You mean about his stand on local affairs?" Tess asked. "They say he's been fighting the mine-owners for years."

"That's what I mean. Before Dr. Malling ever came here, Dr. Villers was saying it was wrong, and bad for the town, for a few top men in the mining companies to run everything. They reckon he had a lot to do with organising that meeting last night."

"Well, it's got me beaten," Tess admitted. "He sounded as nice as could be over the phone. It won't hurt to go and see what it's all about, but I want you to come along."

"He doesn't want to see me."

"You're the only one who's stuck to me, Jane. Whatever Dr. Villers wants, you've got to be with me and speak up."

"I'm just bursting to know what it's about. If he starts on you over this story they're putting around, I'll tell him off!"

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Dr. Villers was fifty years old, though he looked younger. He had a square, strong face, and sympathetic eyes that looked candidly at Tess.

"I brought my friend along," Tess said. "I hope that's all right."

"I'm glad you did. She'll be interested in what we want to talk about."

He took them to his office at the hospital and came straight to the point.

"I got you here to ask you to come and work in my hospital, Nurse," he said. "The Matron usually engages staff, of course, but this is a special case, and she asked me to handle it. Oh, and I'm sure she'd like your friend to come, too. You see, there's been a very big increase in my practice since this trouble at the public hospital. We're crowded out here, and I've arranged to take over the building next door and fit it up as an annexe. My need for more nursing staff is urgent. Is there any reason why you can't take the position?"

The first thought to come to Tess's mind was that Dr. Villers was asking her to work in his hospital only because he had an urgent need of more nurses, that he was compelled to offer her the job, though he probably felt as strongly about her part in the Dr. Malling affair as others did. She was about to say something to that effect when she remembered the feeling she had observed at the public hospital before she left. Even Matron seemed to be considering leaving.

"You don't have to ask us," Tess protested, her emotions rising rapidly. "Almost any nurse at the public hospital would be glad to leave and come here. They're furious about what the Board did."

"But I'm asking you, Nurse. You and your friend. I particularly want you to join our staff."

"No. No, I couldn't doctor, I couldn't stand it."

"Is it something you hold against me?"

"No, nothing like that, Doctor. It's the town, the things people are saying. Blaming me for what the Hospital Board did, saying the most terrible, insulting, frightful things . . ."

Tess had to stop. Her feelings were too explosive to be contained. She could not find the words needed to express what she was trying to say.

Jane reached over and took Tess's hand and squeezed it. Dr. Villers waited for Tess to control her feelings, looking keenly at her.

"The whole town hates me," Tess went on, her voice

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unsteady. "If I came here and worked in your hospital, it might ruin your practice. And this hate, all around me, the lies they're telling. I'm afraid . . ."

"What are you afraid of?" Dr. Villers asked. "Of me? Of my Matron here?"

"It's myself, my nerves. I'm afraid they'll go, I'll break down."

"In that case, I'd like you to consult my partner. He specialises in nerve disorders."

"Your partner? But I didn't think . . ."

"It's a recent arrangement. Will you let me call him? You know Dr. Malling, of course?"

Tess sprang to her feet. "Dr. Malling! Do you mean . . ."

Her mind was utterly confused. New emotions began to flood her mind, adding to the confusion she already felt.

Dr. Malling came quietly into the room. She stared at him. She tried to sort out her thoughts, to straighten up the emotions that seemed to be fighting each other in her breast, to understand and control them.

"I thought you might like to work here, Nurse," Dr. Malling said. "I urged Dr. Villers to send for you."

There were tears in Tess's eyes; they were flowing over, wetting her face, but she wanted to laugh. She thought it was terribly funny that Dr. Malling should want to work with her again, and she knew it was crazy to laugh while she was crying. She tried to stop both, but the tears flowed faster and she heard herself laughing in a way she had never laughed, felt the laugh pain her throat.

Then she felt Dr. Malling's arm across her shoulder.

"Come in here," he was saying, "and we'll talk about it."

He was leading her to the consulting room, and Tess felt calmer at the first touch of his arm on her shoulder. She sank into the chair he offered her almost as if it were a refuge, as if it sheltered her from forces she feared.

"Do you get into this nervous state often?" Dr. Malling asked.

"Not like this. It's the way people are behaving, the way they treat me. As if . . ."

"Yes, I know about that. It is bound to have an unsettling effect, but it's the way you're reacting that concerns me. You've had emotional storms always, haven't you?"

"Well, sometimes when a lot of little things have happened."

"The tension builds up for a time, and then it explodes. Is that what happens?"

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"Something like that, Doctor. I just get to feeling I have to—kind of—well, kind of unload it all on someone."

"In what way? Do you fly into a temper, or tend to hysteria, or . . . ?"

"No, I just want someone's arms around me. Someone who doesn't mind if I cry, and if I kiss him in a silly sort of way, and doesn't misunderstand when I seem to be in a kind of frenzy, as if . . ."

"Does John Dobbie understand?"

"I suppose so. At least he's never behaved as if he thought I wanted—as if—"

"You're being guarded in what you say now, Nurse. I want to help you, but you'll have to be frank."

A cold note had come into Tess's manner when she spoke of John Dobbie. She was thinking of the incident with the newspaper man, and of John's demand that she tell the reporter things she had no right to tell.

"I quarrelled with John today," she said. "He wanted me to tell the newspaper what happened when the Hospital Board was holding that enquiry. I don't have a very good opinion of him now."

"I see. But you could have one of your emotional outbursts on his shoulder with a feeling of safety, could you?"

"Oh, yes. He was very good about that."

"And before you knew him?"

"Oh, I used to let go on Jane. You know, Nurse Morton. She was my room-mate."

"Now, tell me this, Nurse. Isn't that exactly what you did as a child when things got too much for you? Didn't you run to your mother and cry in her arms, and kiss her rather senselessly?"

"Of course. All children do that, don't they?"

"Yes, up to a certain age. Do you love these people passionately? These people on whom you unload your emotions? Nurse Morton, for instance? Or John Dobbie?"

Tess looked at Dr. Malling in blank surprise. "I suppose I must," she said after a moment. "In a different way with each of them, of course."

"I don't think you need to suppose that. You've been away from home for a long time. Do you miss your mother very much?"

"No. In fact, I'd rather be away from home."

"And what about John Dobbie? You quarrelled with him. Will you feel miserable until the quarrel is patched up?"

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"I don't think so. In a way, I'm glad it's all over."

"Then you can't really love him, can you?"

"But then why did I find myself kissing him and crying in his arms whenever things had piled up inside me?"

"I'll try to explain it to you," Dr. Malling said. "These storms of emotion in which you forget yourself are evasions, a way of dodging something instead of facing up to it. All young children do that, of course. They're not equipped to face up to life's problems. They have to run away from them, and they naturally run to their mother's arms. They haven't the power to express what they feel, so they give the one expression they know their mothers will welcome. Most people learn how to manage their emotions as they grow older, but some dodge the issue. You see? That's what you've been doing. You're still an infant in this particular regard."

"You mean I'm retarded? I . . . I haven't grown up? But you wouldn't want me at your operations, or here—"

"Only in that one direction," Dr. Malling interrupted. "You've never learned to face things squarely. You let them frighten you, and hide behind a screen of uncontrollable emotion. You're thoroughly adult in every other way."

"I don't understand," Tess said helplessly. "I don't make up my mind to do it. I don't work myself up. It just happens."

"You don't look your little day-to-day problems in the face. Little things you could easily manage. Instead you let them make you feel annoyed, or angry, or helpless. You see? Instead of solving your problems you transform them into vague emotions, and the load gets too big, it bursts its bonds."

"I've tried to, Doctor. Why, I went down to the beach the other day and tried to think all this straight."

"Did you succeed?"

"No, I—"

"I want you to start facing things now. I want you to come and work here, not run away from this situation. I know this is something big enough to frighten anyone. But you can face it, and control it, and you'll find your smaller problems easy to handle after that."

"But that isn't why you sent for me," Tess said. "You must have had another reason."

"Yes," he said. He gazed up at the ceiling, not at Tess. "There were a number of other reasons. For one thing, you're experienced in assisting me with my particular type of operation."

"If I'm working here, working with you, people might stop treating me like a kind of traitor," Tess said.

"And, if you run away, they'll say it proves all the worst stories they've been making up."

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"I don't suppose it really matters what people think, so long as I know they'll learn it was wrong."

"I'm going to have more cases coming here all the time," Dr. Malling told her. "You'll be giving me valuable assistance. There's no place where you could do more useful work."

"I think I'll stay. I feel different about the town now. Maybe I've been facing things without knowing it while I was talking to you."

"Quite likely," he smiled, "but you'll find that your battle isn't won as easily as that. You'll have to be on guard."

"When can we come here? You see, we've been ordered to leave the hotel. The publican's afraid he'll lose trade through having us there."

"Why not move into the cottage tonight?"

"All right. I'm pretty sure Jane'll be glad. I don't think she liked the idea of going to Sydney."

The two nurses went to the hotel and commenced packing the few things they had unpacked. Jane was delighted. She was sure it was going to turn out quite well. They were ready to leave, and Jane went to find the proprietor to tell him.

She came back with three men whom Tess had never met before.

"We're from the committee that was appointed by the public meeting," one of the men said.

Tess knew these men by sight, as one must know residents of a small town after living there for some years. The spokesman was a local solicitor, another was a miner, and the third owned the largest bakery in town. None was looking at Tess in an unfriendly manner. The spokesman was very polite.

"I don't see what you want with me," Tess told them.

"Well, first of all, the committee wants you to know it didn't have anything to do with the way you were treated at this hotel."

"They're afraid the miners will spend their beer money somewhere else," Tess said. "I don't know who made up the slander against me, but whoever did is to blame for us being kicked out of this pub."

"Those stories did not come from our committee, or from anything said at the public meeting, Nurse. I'm inclined to think they came from someone at the hospital."

"Quite likely. Now, if you'll excuse me, we're all ready to—"

Tess was warmed by the assurance, by the signs of friendliness in men she thought must share the general hostility toward her. On the other hand, she wanted to avoid another argument about what happened at the hospital.

The lawyer interrupted her. "We came to give you that

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assurance, Nurse, but we also want to appeal to you to help the committee. Our purpose is to have Dr. Malling reinstated. Do you think he should be reinstated?"

"How many times do I have to tell people that no nurse has any right to express an opinion about the merits of a doctor? You've no right to ask me a question like that."

"That wasn't what I meant to ask you. The committee is convinced, and the public, too, that the Board's motives were unworthy, that they were not concerned about the hospital at all when they suspended Dr. Malling. They had other reasons which they don't dare state. You know that is so, don't you?"

"What makes you think I know that?" Tess asked.

"Well, your attitude when the newspaper tried to get . . ."

"You weren't there. What do you know about my attitude?"

"We were told. It gave us the idea that you've been used in this affair without intending it. And the question here isn't just a matter of being fair to one man, Nurse. It's the effect on our public hospital, making its Superintendent depend on the personal favour of a few men. You must see that no hospital can serve the needs of the district fully in those circumstances. And think of the effect on any other doctor at the hospital who might want to demand proper health and safety measures in the mines. He would have to weigh his duty against his job. He would know that his professional character would be injured. It's a question of whether selfish men, because they have influence, are to feel free to injure the whole community at will. We want you to help us put a stop to that."

"But I don't see what I could do, even if I did agree with what you say," Tess protested.

"You could tell the public who it was prompted you to make a charge against Dr. Malling."

"No one prompted me! You're going on these rotten lies . . ."

She remembered what Dr. Malling had just been saying to her, and restrained herself.

"Are you telling the whole truth, Nurse? Didn't Dobbie, John Dobbie, have something to do with it?"

Tess found it terribly hard to keep calm. Here were the same slanders these men had said they had nothing to do with. It was a struggle, but she managed to answer calmly and reasonably.

"You may not have started those stories going," she said, "but you seem to believe them. The best answer I can give is this. Dr. Malling knows all the facts, all of them. He is working with Dr. Villers now, as his partner, and it was Dr. Malling who urged Dr. Villers to send for me and persuade me to take a position in his private hospital. Isn't that enough?"

For a moment the three men stared at Tess in surprise.

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"That's perfectly true," Jane put in. "We're both going there."
"I'd like to believe it. I'd like to think it was Dr. Malling who . . ."

"You don't have to believe us," Jane said sharply. "We're leaving this minute to take up our quarters in the cottage. Why don't you come along and ask Dr. Malling? Ask him in Tess's presence. Get it from the man himself."

The committee men glanced at each other. Then they exchanged nods.

Dr. Villers received the committee cordially. He had been associated with these men in a great many struggles for the wellbeing of the town. Dr. Malling greeted them with a certain amount of reserve, however.

"Please don't ask me to discuss the pros and cons of this case," he said when they had stated their reasons for accompanying the girls. "It still has to be investigated by the Medical Association, you know."

"Nurse Walden claims she wasn't prompted to lay a charge against you, Doctor. She says you asked to have her put on the staff here."

"I'll say only one thing about that," Dr. Malling answered. "You can advertise it as widely as possible. I have a very high regard for Nurse Walden as a nurse, and as a person. There are no grounds whatever for the hostility being shown toward her. All she did was to refuse to lie, even though some people thought it would be better for the hospital if she did."

"Can you say what she refused to lie about?"

"Certainly not."

"And about these rumours that the Matron and sister . . ."

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I'm not free to discuss it any further. I know you think my dismissal was a mistake. I agree with you about that." He smiled broadly. "You'll have to leave it at that, I'm afraid."

This interview left Tess dazed. She had struggled with her emotions and had controlled them, as Dr. Malling urged her. She was not aware of the strain this struggle had put upon her until she found that the others had left the room, and she was standing facing Dr. Malling, and he was gazing at her with that glow on him that she had noticed at times before these incidents commenced.

The strain was too great. She had to have support. She moved a few steps toward him, and found herself resting her head on his shoulder while tears coursed down her cheeks.

In a moment, he said, "You'll never become a real woman, Nurse, as long as you use men as mother-substitutes."

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She drew away from him swiftly. She brushed the tears from her eyes and looked at him in fear. It was as if he had charged her with something shameful.

"A child's love for its mother is one thing," he added "The love of a woman for a man is something quite different."

She still could not speak. She could only gaze at him, afraid that she had discredited herself in his eyes.

"There's nothing wrong with either of them," he went on. "But you'll only produce tragedy for yourself if you mix the two and get them confused."

CHAPTER IX

Tess did not expect the nurses at the private hospital to accept her without hostility. She knew them all slightly and realised that some were on very friendly terms with the nursing staff at the public hospital. Tess knew they would have heard the slanders about her — and from girls who were determined to poison as many minds as possible.

She was received very coolly, but none of the nurses actually said anything in her hearing, as the girls at the public hospital had done. None of them got up and left the table when Tess sat down. They spoke to her as to a stranger, answered any questions she asked in the fewest possible words, but took their dislike no further.

Even this was hard to endure. There was so much behind it, it indicated their acceptance of so many insulting stories about her, that their cold politeness hurt almost as deeply as if they had sneered in her face. And when, on her first day on duty, two of the patients made hurtful remarks to her, Tess was tempted to break down again, to give up the struggle to control her emotions, and run away from it all as she had planned.

Each time this temptation assailed her she held it off. She remembered what Dr. Malling had said and relived the interview, and the memory of it brought a little of the resolve and strength that she had felt when she had decided to remain.

Perhaps the attitude of the nurses softened in the first few days. Or perhaps Tess got used to it, and found that it mattered

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less. Or, again, the very exercise of control, the very refusal to hide from the situation in emotional outbursts, may have made the difference. Whatever the reason, she became more serene, even a little happy in the knowledge that she was equal to a very difficult situation.

She felt this particularly when she was assisting Dr. Malling with his special operations. She understood why he had wanted her to assist him. He used instruments which most nurses had never seen, the uses of which they had but a vague notion. He could give his attention more completely to his surgery when he knew the nurse assisting would understand at once which instrument he wanted when he named it.

Here, in the operating theatre with Dr. Malling, she was highly valued. She got warm glances of approval, and she hoped he was approving her mastery of herself as much her skill as an assistant.

Cases requiring neuro-surgery were coming from distant places in increasing numbers. They were coming to Dr. Malling now, not to the public hospital as before. They were coming to this private hospital, as were many general cases which previously would have gone to the public institution. Tess learned that more and more people responded to the action against Dr. Malling by paying the extra fees for treatment by him in Dr. Villers' hospital.

The special operations were almost daily, and the element of wonder which had previously impressed itself on Tess never weakened. A doctor, or at any rate a neurologist, perhaps would experience no wonder at the results Dr. Malling obtained. They would understand what he was doing and the reason he achieved these results, but a nurse's training does not include such knowledge.

There was a man with a bad speech impediment. Tess heard Dr. Malling telling Dr. Villers that there was no organic malformation, and none of the mental symptoms that always accompany an impediment which is due to psychological causes. The doctors who sent the patient to Dr. Malling had concluded that the trouble must be in the nerve-centre controlling the vocal organs.

Tess had seen Dr. Malling spending hours with this man, talking to him, requiring him to talk, and when this patient lay on the operating table there was no hesitancy, no guesswork about the doctor's incisions.

The operation was on the back of the man's neck, high up near the skull. Here arteries and an intricate system of small muscles had to be carefully avoided. Dr. Malling's every move was sure and bold until he had uncovered the tiny trouble spot,

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and went to work with his powerful lenses and his special instruments. Tess could not get even a hint of what he was doing then.

But she knew he was sure the operation had been another triumph, for that glow was in his eyes when it was finished, and his smile at her was warm and sent her blood tingling.

Everyone in the hospital, nurses and patients alike, shared Tess's wonder over that operation, for all had heard the painful efforts the patient had made when he was trying to talk before the operation. Then, when the effects of the anaesthetic had passed, they heard him shouting in jubilation because his speech was normal.

And Tess found herself looking forward to Dr. Mallings's visits to the ward, glancing at her watch when he was about due, counting the minutes. Her heart always pounded a little faster when she was told she must assist him with an operation. That meant that they would be working together silently, but in intimate communication, for an hour or more. It meant she would probably see again that warm smile on her and that glow of achievement in his eyes. Now that she was shut off from the friendship of almost everyone except Jane and the doctor, she lived for those hours, her life seemed blank between them.

John Dobbie came often to her mind, but not with regret. She was not longing to see him. She now felt a certain amount of shame that she had ever let go a flood of emotion in his arms. She understood it more as she gradually conquered her childish emotional habits.

She no longer wondered if she had loved John; she knew she had not loved him. And she knew that, to him, the aims of his associates had always been more important than any interest he had in her.

Her thoughts went most frequently to Dr. Mallings, though she could never make up her mind why. She could say it was admiration, nothing more, and that satisfied her for a time, until she began glancing at her watch and counting the minutes till he was due in the ward. Then she began to feel uneasy, sometimes afraid.

At other times, in her room off duty, the alarming memory of that night when Mrs. Gillen seemed to be dying returned.

It returned more and more often, always with the unanswered question striking at Tess's heart rather than occupying her mind. Where was Dr. Mallings during the hour or so he was absent? Who was he with? What was he doing for that hour?

There was no answer, for Dr. Mallings had flatly refused to give even a hint, and no one but the woman who called at the hospital for him knew more than Tess knew. The woman seemed

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to be the only person in town who was not talking about Dr. Mallings's suspension.

Tess tried to persuade herself that there was an answer to all these puzzles, that the answer, when it was revealed, would show that Dr. Mallings's absence was justified, that he was giving urgent emergency treatment to someone, that two duties had confronted him and he had given preference to the one that seemed most compelling.

That would have satisfied Tess whatever the Board might have said; but she could not persuade herself of it. He could have said that much at least. The patient he went to treat could have come forward. It was Dr. Mallings's refusal to say where he was or why he left the hospital or who he was with or whether he was with anyone; it was this that made the memory so painful, so unbearably baffling.

For all her admiration and even with this new feeling of happiness in his presence, Tess could not get away from the same conclusion Dr. Mallings's enemies had drawn, and this soon became a pain in her breast that remained even when her thoughts were on other things. But this hurt did not drive her to a storm of emotion. It produced only a heaviness of spirit.

This confusion had been going on for some days, weighing more heavily on her each day, when she was called to the telephone and heard John Dobbie's voice over the wire as she had done so often in the past. It was the same pleasant voice, the same intimately friendly tone.

This repetition of a familiar experience had an effect which caught Tess off her guard. With the sound of John's voice making the usual offer to meet her and take her home to dinner, she was back again in the emotional climate which had always accompanied this experience. The heaviness of her spirit became an explosive pressure of emotions demanding self-forgetful release. The need to evade, to dodge the demanding issues facing her, seemed to overwhelm her. The past quarrel, the calm conclusion that there was no love binding them together, were forgotten; it was the interlude of adult self-control which was wiped out.

Tess agreed without thinking and then commenced excitedly getting dressed to meet John. It was only then, while she was doing her hair, that she saw what happened.

She paused and sat motionless before her mirror. She should not have accepted the invitation. She knew that the association with John was bad for her, and that his attachment to her was shallow, not a deep love. Worse still, she had accepted with exactly the motives that drove her when a small child to her

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mother's arms. She was escaping again into a false emotional childhood, escaping from that puzzling problem and the heaviness of spirit that it caused.

She wanted to escape, she wanted to dodge. She felt for a little time that it would be sheer bliss to return to her emotional childhood, to face nothing, to screen all problems behind a storm of emotion and what appeared to be uninhibited passion. Why should she not? What harm did it do? She knew from experience that she was safe in John's arms.

But Tess remembered Dr. Mallings's warning. She knew that he was right. She knew that despite the heaviness of her heart lately she had found more serenity, more sense of controlling her own life since her talk with him. This was probably the vital test.

She started to the telephone to call John and tell him she would not meet him. Then she stopped and bit her lip.

That would be another evasion, not the decision she needed.

"No, I'll really face it," she said to herself. "I'll meet him, I'll have dinner with him. I'll keep my poise."

It was a brave decision, possibly the bravest she had ever made; but she was trembling slightly as she went to meet John.

He expected an emotional demonstration. That was clear from his manner when they met. And once again the urge to give way assailed her, and she fought grimly to defeat it.

"You're not still angry, are you?" John asked.

"No, I'm not angry. I still think you had no right to bring that man from the newspaper there to ask me questions, but I've got over my anger."

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"There's no reason why I should, John. We're not in love, you know."

"Well, you used to. I thought . . ."

"I was being silly. I won't behave like that again."

It was hard, but she managed to say it a way that sounded final. John was awkward with her after that. He must have sensed the extent to which she had become a different person, and Tess herself did not realise how this change in her emotional expression, this disciplining of her passionate impulses, this adult poise of self-control and untroubled facing of life, was changing her personality.

"Dad's coming home for dinner tonight," John said. "Quite an occasion. He has dinner at the club as often as not."

"It'll be nice to meet him again."

She didn't really mean that. She knew Mr. Dobbie's presence

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at the table would bring back the scene when she was telling the Hospital Board about Mrs. Gillen and Dr. Malling, and that would not be a pleasant memory. Mr. Dobbie would insist on talking about it, of course. It would be another test of her ability to keep her temper under control.

Mr. and Mrs. Dobbie were very pleasant and friendly. They gave Tess a very good dinner and when they were on the final course, Mrs. Dobbie said, "You're working in Dr. Villers' hospital now, aren't you, Nurse?"

"Yes, Dr. Malling has gone into partnership with Dr. Villers. He asked me to come there."

"You may get something of a shock pretty soon," Dobbie said. "You'd better prepare for it. Dr. Malling is going to be expelled from the Medical Association, you know."

"I heard that the Association was to hold an enquiry," Tess said.

"Oh, that's only a formality. They've got all the facts, all the evidence, and there's only one thing they can do."

There were a few seconds when Tess thought she had lost the struggle. Her anger flared, and it must have tinged her cheeks. Perhaps the biggest victory she had yet had was her success in controlling it, and answering in a calm, reasoning voice.

"It seems a rather extreme measure, doesn't it?" she asked. "It's such a black mark against a doctor."

"But he neglected his duty when there was no one else to step in. If you leave a man like that in the profession someone will die through his neglect."

"It only happened the once, Mr. Dobbie. And we don't know why he was away. If we knew that, we might have a different view . . ."

"That's where you're wrong, Nurse. The Board has found out that he left in a taxi and with a young woman. We can't find out who she was, but the taxi-driver took them to a flat, one of those at the shady end of town."

This report struck a sharp pain through Tess's heart, but it told her very little that was new. Her thoughts had dwelt too often on that hour of Dr. Malling's absence, and her imagination had sometimes been too vivid in picturing what he was doing in his absence. Now that Dobbie had enough evidence to satisfy almost anyone, Tess felt alarm rather than anger.

It seemed impossible to find an innocent explanation. She had hoped in the back of her mind that the explanation would put everything right, if only Dr. Malling could give it. That

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hope vanished with Dobbie's statement and left her feeling certain that disaster faced him.

"I suppose the Medical Association will take a very serious view of it in that case," Tess said.

"What else can they do? People can be as broad-minded as they like, but neglecting a hospital full of sick people is a different matter."

"It's hard to believe that any doctor would do that," Tess said.

"Well, there you are. I just told you so you'd be prepared for the shock when it comes."

Tess never found out exactly why she was invited to the Dobbie's home that night. She supposed that John had missed her company and wanted to re-establish their previous relationship. If that was so, her calm manner and the way she held him at a distance, must have satisfied him that it could not be re-established. On the other hand, she suspected that they may have hoped she would let something more slip about Dr. Malling, something they could add to the evidence they already had against him.

She was very careful not to do that. She remained pleasant and the Dobbies saw that she wanted to end the gossip about the doctor, so they said no more about it. She excused herself and returned to the hospital early.

Jane was in the room when Tess got back.

"Well!" she said. "I thought you'd finished with John Dobbie."

"I have really. I went tonight just to prove it to myself and to him. But they told me something Dr. Malling ought to know."

"Have they been raking up more dirt?"

"I suppose you'd call it that. I'm terribly afraid they'll get him put out of the Association. I think he ought to be warned."

"Well, he's in the men's ward now. He's doing an examination of a patient who was flown in from inter-State."

Tess started to the ward at a run. Then she stopped and forced herself to walk composedly. Her heart was pounding, and that hurt, because what she was going to tell the doctor was something that seemed to hurt her more the closer she came to him.

She found him merely standing at the patient's bed and looking at him. The patient seemed to be barely conscious. Dr. Malling's eyes were thoughtful when he turned them to Tess.

"I was told something tonight, Doctor. I think you should know it," Tess said.

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"Come out on to the verandah where we won't disturb the patients," he said.

He walked beside her to the verandah, glancing at her twice in his keenly questioning way. When they stopped she told him what she had heard, that the Board had found a taxi-driver to back up the story, and the Board was sure the Medical Association would expell him.

"Yes, it's quite likely," Dr. Malling said. "I knew they had found the driver, of course. Who told you?"

"Mr. Dobbie. I had dinner with them tonight."

"They had no right to tell you. They're not playing fair, but of course I knew they wouldn't."

"I don't know why they invited me unless it was to tell me this."

"Maybe John is still interested in you."

"I don't think he was ever very interested. Anyway, he knows by now that I'm finished with him."

"Did you have an argument? Did you lose your temper?"

"Should I have?"

"You should never lose your temper. Did you tonight?"

"No, Doctor, I didn't. I thought I was going to, but I managed to control it."

The doctor merely smiled at her.

"I'm keeping you from the new patient," Tess suggested.

"No, he's been given a heavy sedative, and I can't do a diagnosis till the effect passes. I may have to operate in the morning and I'll need your help."

"Will they — will it interfere with this work you're doing if the Association expells you?" Tess asked.

"I don't know," he said softly, looking out over the hospital grounds. "It depends on the attitude the officials take. They could stop most of the patients who are coming to me from other doctors. On the other hand . . . but there's no use speculating. And I'm interested in your case, Nurse. You seem to have broken the shell that was keeping you imprisoned in your emotional childhood."

"I may have," Tess said. "I seem to feel differently about things."

But the one thing she had hoped to hear when she came to tell the doctor what Dobbie had said she had not heard. She was aware as she spoke that the heaviness of her heart had grown to a pain in her breast, that the warm feeling of well-being she usually experienced in Dr. Malling's presence was gone,

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replaced by this pain, and by fear of disaster that seemed, in some way, to involve her.

As the pain grew, she knew she had hoped to hear him say that she was not to worry about Dobbie's story, that he would have an explanation which would satisfy everyone and rob the incident of its damning appearance. There had also been a flicker of hope that he might have told her in confidence why he left the hospital that night and on what mission of mercy or healing he was engaged. But the hopes had been vague, not clearly defined and now that they were disappointed, they became sharp in outline.

"I'd better get some sleep," Tess said. "Good night, Doctor."

She hurried away before he could say something that might add to the pain she already felt.

This was quite different from the panic, the anger and helplessness she had felt when she had been surrounded by hate, the target for slander. This was a feeling of personal hurt, of personal loss, within herself, not something outside herself. It was as if the shameful neglect by Dr. Mallings on the night of the incident had hit Tess, ruined her hopes, even more than his. Yet she went to bed looking forward to the morning when she would probably assist Dr. Mallings with another operation, looking forward to it as the only ray of light in her life.

The patient was brought to the operating theatre groaning in an agony of pain. One of his legs was peculiarly twisted, as if the muscles of the leg were themselves pulling at it, trying to dislocate the joint.

Tess learned that this was literally what was occurring, for Dr. Villers was there, deeply interested, eager to learn from the younger doctor all he could about the diagnosis and treatment of such cases.

"The nerve impulses that control muscular action have got mixed," Dr. Mallings explained. "I suppose it's something like crossed telephone wires when you dial one number and get another. In this case normal impulses which keep the tension of various muscles balanced, and so keep the limb straight and functioning properly, have got crossed. They're making the muscles pull the leg crooked. It's a malfunctioning in this nerve-centre here."

He tapped the point of the man's anatomy where the fault lay.

"Do you know the cause?" Dr. Villers asked.

"Not in this case. Quite possibly there's been intense inflammation in the region of the trouble. Or it could be some slight

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injury too slight to appear serious. Or the cause may have been there for a long time, creating only slight pain, but developing until it suddenly reached this point."

This operation took a very long time. Tess gathered from the few words that passed between the two doctors that Dr. Malling discovered the cause of the faulty nerve-impulses when he had exposed the nerve-channels and was examining the tiny nerves. It was all so minute that she could not guess what he found, but it prolonged the operation, it called for a second anaesthetic, it brought into play two of Dr. Malling's special instruments that he very rarely used.

After an hour and a half of this tense work, he applied the dressings and closed the incisions, and the patient was taken to his bed in the ward.

In the washroom, when they had removed their masks, she saw Dr. Villers looking at the other doctor with admiration, even awe. But she did not see in Dr. Malling's face the glow of achievement which she always sought.

"I want you to go to that patient as soon as you've finished in the theatre, Nurse," Dr. Malling said. "I want you to stand by him until he regains consciousness. Call me the instant he commences moving."

"You'll tell Sister, of course," Tess said. "She'll need me for other duties."

"Yes, I'll tell her."

"You're not afraid the operation failed, are you?" Villers asked in surprise.

"Not really, but it's the most intricate bit of neuro-surgery I've ever done. There are so many possibilities of a small error, and even the smallest error in such a case means failure."

Tess sterilised the instruments, did the necessary cleaning and tidying and then went to the bed of the unconscious man.

She had not long to wait for the first signs of consciousness. There was a slight movement of the eyelids, then of the lips. She glanced down at the lower part of the bed to see if there was movement of his lower limbs. There was none as yet. She decided to wait until she saw a toe move, or some other sign. She knew that she herself was breathing unevenly and her heart was racing slightly. This case seemed very important to her, probably because she had not yet seen the warm light in the eyes of Dr. Malling, and her sense of impending disaster made it terribly necessary to see that.

In a little while the patient's lower limbs began to move restlessly under the bedding. Both limbs moved in a normal

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manner. The patient was muttering to himself, only half aware of his surroundings, but there was no hint of pain in his mutterings.

Tess hurried to Dr. Mallings's office. She found him consulting one of his books. He looked up with a question in his manner.

"He's moving his legs, Doctor. Both legs, no pain, no . . ."

"I'll see."

He strode eagerly ahead of Tess. He found the patient almost fully conscious, sufficiently awake to recognise Dr. Mallings.

"No pain, Doc," he said. "Did you give me a shot, or . . ."

The doctor threw off the blankets. "Lift your left leg," he ordered.

The man lifted his left leg a little off the bed, but Dr. Mallings and Tess watched the right leg, which was the one affected. It lay in repose, in a natural position.

"Now your right leg."

The patient hesitated a little. The memory of pain when he had tried to use that leg held him back. Eventually he lifted it slowly, then let it back on to the bed.

Tess turned her eyes on the doctor. She saw the warm glow, she saw that he turned his face to her as if asking her to share his sense of achievement.

"You'll be all right," he told the patient. "Don't try to do too much with that leg for a little while. The muscles are pretty tired from the unnatural strain, so you'd better rest them."

"Yeah, I'll rest. Never thought I'd get another hour's rest as long as I lived."

"I'm having coffee in my office, Nurse. Sister can spare you long enough to have a cup with me."

They sipped their coffee without speaking for a little while. Then Dr. Mallings pushed a copy of that morning's paper toward Tess. "You see?" he said. "Somebody let the Press get hold of that taxi-driver's story."

There it was on the front page, inside information about the reason the Board dismissed Dr. Mallings, and the evidence on which the Medical Association was expected to act.

"Is it true, Doctor?" Tess asked, putting the question she had wanted to put so often.

"Up to a certain point it's true. I can't deny any of the facts reported here."

"Do you still think they'll expell you?"

"I think it's likely. The officials will be here tomorrow. This is a kind of curtain-raiser."

"You'll still be allowed to practise, won't you?"

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"Oh, yes, but I won't get nearly so many of the kind of cases we had this morning."

"That'll be a terrible loss," Tess said.

He put his hand out and touched Tess's hand.

That was all, but in that instant she knew that she loved Dr. Mallings, and that her love was the love of a woman, not the need of a child for a mother, or a substitute for her mother. And she held back the impulse she felt to show it. She thought he, too, was holding himself back.

Her eyes went from his face to the newspaper on the desk, and to the headlines alleging that Dr. Mallings had neglected his duties, left a woman near to death, while he took a woman to a downtown flat . . .

She sprang up and ran out of the office. The thought was a torture she could not bear. She reported to the ward, and threw herself frantically into her work in an effort to shut out the thought of that hour when Dr. Mallings was away.

CHAPTER X

There was no joy for Tess in the discovery that she loved Dr. Malling. She could find no happiness even in the indications he had given of a feeling toward her somewhat more personal than the mere relation of a doctor to a nurse.

For one thing, the verdict of the Association officials overshadowed all Tess's thoughts. The day ahead was fateful for Dr. Malling, and she had the irrational conviction that it would be equally fateful for her. And, in addition, behind that fate was the fact, not denied by the doctor, which Dobbie had told her about the taxi and which the paper had published. She could not let her thoughts linger on her love for him while she saw with such painful clarity the conjunction of these two things.

Tess got up in the morning and faced the day with a feeling of doom hanging over her. Her heart was heavier than it had ever been. It was more painful than a mere heaviness of spirit, however. It was a pain which seemed centred in her breast, but which affected all of her. The realisation that a few words of her own spoken lightly to the wrong person had produced this trouble; the memory of the degree to which her refusal to tell a lie had helped along Dr. Malling's enemies; and the brutal fact revealed by Dobbie all contributed to the pain, to the heaviness, to the wish that she could run away from it all, hide from it forget it . . .

Tess was busy on routine work when this powerful desire

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to escape came over her. Something within her was prompting her thoughts, telling her she could never endure going on, feeling the blame she could not deny, loving the man she almost ruined, compelled to reject her love of him because of his inexcusable behaviour with another woman. She paused in her work. There was nothing holding her here. She could tell the Matron now that the strain was beyond her, that she must leave to avoid breaking under it.

She looked around the ward in case the Matron was there. Not seeing her, Tess started for her office.

She had taken only half a dozen steps when Dr. Malling came striding into the ward. His face lit up when he saw Tess.

"I was looking for you," he said. "They're putting me on the carpet this morning. We'll know the worst before long."

"Are you sure they won't want to question me?"

"I'm pretty sure of it. It isn't a trial, you see."

"Will you . . . Will you be able to explain your absence?" she asked before she could stop herself.

He shook his head. "There are some things one simply cannot tell," he said. "I might help myself a little, but I'd hurt someone else much more."

"I—I was going to . . ."

She found she could not tell him what she had intended doing, not while he stood there, facing something as bad, at least, as she faced, and seeming untroubled by it.

"What were you going to say?" he asked.

"Nothing. I was just being childish again."

"I'd like to know that I've got your good wishes," he said.

She threw up her head and looked him in the face. She felt very brave in that moment, brave enough to endure the pain in her heart, brave enough to go on with her work, not only today but through the heavy-hearted days to come.

"Yes," she said. "You have my good wishes, all my good wishes."

"Thanks," he said. "I'm expecting the worst, but I'll face it better now."

He was gone. He was going out through the entrance, he was getting into his car, he was driving it away, going to the Public Hospital where the Hospital Board, and officials from the Medical Association, were waiting to seal his fate, to take from him what he must have if he was to feel that he was fulfilling his life's purpose.

Tess forced herself to proceed with her duties. She forced her mind to attend to them, even though the pain weighing so heavily on her had not eased. It had lifted for a moment

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while she was talking to Dr. Malling, but it returned as soon as he had left the ward.

Half an hour passed. It seemed to Tess like a year. Then one of the sisters came to her and drew her into the corridor.

"Nurse, there's a woman out there who insists on talking to you. She refuses to give her name. She seems very worked up over something."

"I can't think who it could be. What does she want me for?"

"She won't tell us that, either. She asked for Dr. Malling at first. When I told her he was in conference with officials of the Association, she demanded to talk to you. I think you'd better go out and see if you can get rid of her."

Tess felt a little afraid as she went to the hospital entrance. The newspaper story about Dr. Malling had shown him in a very bad light so far as his moral character was concerned, and Tess knew there were people who considered it their duty to bring some kind of retribution on to those who violated the strict moral codes of the narrowest minded. Tess feared she would be the target of a sermon of denunciation, or would have a half-mad fanatic to deal with.

But the woman she encountered looked anything but a fanatic. She was about thirty, and very pretty. She was certainly deeply in earnest about whatever had brought her here, but she was self-composed.

"You wanted to see me?" Tess asked.

"Are you Nurse Walden?"

"Yes, but I don't know you, do I?"

"No, I was only an out-patient at the Public Hospital. But people in town have been saying you started all this trouble for Dr. Malling, and then I heard you'd come here to work with him. You don't want them to ruin him, do you?"

"I'd do anything to stop it if I could, but—"

"He's up before the Association now, isn't he? Can't you get him on the phone? Let me talk to him on the phone?"

"Do you know something that might help him?"

"That's just it, Nurse! That's why I came here. I read what the paper printed yesterday, and I can't keep quiet any longer. You see, Nurse, I'm the woman they talked about."

"You're the woman he took to a flat that night?"

"Yes, Nurse, but it's not what people think. It's not like that at all. If they'd let me talk to the officials, if . . ."

"What was he doing?" Tess asked.

"He was saving lives, he was preventing a terrible tragedy. He couldn't tell the Board, and he may not tell the Medical Association, because he'd be afraid it would undo what he did

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that night. But I can tell them. I have to tell them. I owe him too much. I'd never forgive myself . . ."

"I'll see that they listen to you!" Tess interrupted. "Taxi! Come on! Get in."

Tess was deserting her post, neglecting her duties now. But she was doing it for the sake of something many times more important. She got into the taxi in her uniform. She directed the driver to the Public Hospital and told him to hurry.

When they got there she paid the driver and took the woman, who had said her name was Mrs. Watson, through the entrance. She swept past the girl at the desk before she could act. She and Mrs. Watson almost ran to the Superintendent's office, where Tess knew the Board and the officials would be making their decision. The door was not locked and Tess burst in.

There was Dobbie, looking triumphant in his gloating way, and Amos glaring hate at Dr. Malling, and the officials of the Association looking extremely grave and glowering. And there was Dr. Malling, as calm as ever.

All eyes turned in surprise on Tess. Mrs. Watson had remained outside, so none saw her. Dr. Brown, who seemed to be conducting affairs, half rose, and said, "You've no right here . . ."

"You have to listen to me. The woman who was with Dr. Malling that night is here. She wants to tell you why the doctor left the hospital."

Dr. Malling sprang to his feet, suddenly concerned, a little worried.

"You say she is here?" he asked.

"She's just outside in the hall. She . . ."

"Gentlemen," Dr. Malling said appealingly. "She has a right to be heard if she insists, but it might injure a number of people. If this Hospital Board could be trusted to observe a confidence, it would be all right, but I say frankly there are members of the Board present who cannot be trusted. That's been shown clearly in the last few days."

Amos and Dobbie got up angrily, spluttering.

"Sit down, please!" Dr. Brown snapped. "What do you suggest, Dr. Malling?"

"This enquiry concerns only the officials of my Association," Dr. Malling said. "Board members have already given all the information they can give. I want this evidence given only to men who are to be trusted, say in the Matron's office, while the Board remains here."

"You can't sneak out of it that way, Malling!" Amos shouted. "Rig something up behind our backs, and then come back here as Medical Superintendent and snap your fingers at the Board."

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"Calm yourself, Mr. Amos," one of the officials said. "This enquiry has nothing to do with Dr. Mallings' reinstatement. It simply concerns his position as a member of the Association. You are here only to give us your reasons for demanding his expulsion."

He and the two officials with him got to their feet.

"We'll go to the Matron's office. I'd like this nurse, and you, Dr. Brown, to come with us."

The Board members were left gaping, glancing at each other in uneasiness and anger. Dr. Mallings came quickly into the corridor, took Mrs. Watson's arm and led her to the Matron's office. Dr. Brown beckoned Tess, and she went with him and the officials.

Matron Kinkead was not in her office. They took possession of it, sitting around her desk, with Mrs. Watson in the centre.

"This is Mrs. Watson, one of my patients," Dr. Mallings said. "I think it is understood that nothing said here will be repeated outside this room, not even Mrs. Watson's name."

"I'm sure we can depend on everyone here," Dr. Brown agreed. "Now, Mrs. Watson. On the night when Dr. Mallings was absent from duty here, he was with you?"

"Yes, but it wasn't what people are saying," Mrs. Watson insisted. "You see, I had consulted Dr. Mallings as an out-patient. I thought there was something wrong with my nerves. My own doctor thought so, and sent me to Dr. Mallings, and he—he found out it wasn't my nerves. It was because of a terrible position I'd got myself into, and treatment of my nerves wouldn't do any good. It was—can't you tell them, Doctor?"

"You gentlemen will understand my diagnosis," Dr. Mallings said. "Mrs. Watson's nervous symptoms were due to intense emotional conflict and mental strain. When I told her that, told her that treatment for her nerves would do no good, she broke down and revealed the true cause of her illness. That's what concerns this enquiry."

"It was an affair with . . . with another man," Mrs. Watson said. "I knew it was wrong. I think I loved my husband all the time it was going on. I know I loved my children desperately; but it was as if there was another me, the same person in every way, except that this other me was completely fascinated by the other man, my lover, you might call him. I thought I was helpless, I had to go to him when he asked me, but all the time I wanted to cling to my husband and children. My husband never found out. I was terrified at what he might do if he did. You see? That was why my nerves were going, and Dr. Mallings told me that no doctor could do anything for me, that I had to make my choice, get rid of the conflict one

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way or the other. He said that was urgent. He said that it might help to talk about it to him. He advised me to consult him again if I thought it would help."

"Did you?" one of the officials asked.

"Yes, I had to. The inner struggle got worse. I couldn't give up my family, and I couldn't resist my lover."

"Was that when Dr. Malling left the hospital with you?"

"No, that came later. When I saw him the second time, I was feeling so desperate I simply had to talk to someone, and he was the only one I dared talk to about it. You see, I had tried to break the affair off, but the man . . . Well, he seemed more infatuated than I was. He said he'd kill himself if I did. We even talked about both ending it that way. That's when I came back to Dr. Malling. And he showed me that I'd ruin the lives of my husband and children if I did that, that the whole thing would get into the papers, of course. It would be better just to go off somewhere with my lover, but better still to make him see that the whole thing had to end, and to get him to end it sensibly. I could see it all so clearly while I was talking to the doctor, and I felt strong enough for it; but then, after a time . . ."

"Let's come to the night that concerns us," Dr. Brown said. "What brought you to the hospital that night?"

"I think I ought to explain one thing," Dr. Malling put in. "I was convinced the threat of a double suicide was real. I got a solemn pledge from Mrs. Watson that, if this temptation lured her again, she would come and see me before she took the fatal step."

"That's why I came here that night," Mrs. Watson went on. "I hadn't been able to make a choice. We had made our pact. We had everything ready, and then I remembered my promise. I told my lover there was one thing I had to put right before we took the poison. I got a taxi and came here. I was determined on the deed, but felt I just had to keep my promise and tell the doctor. I kept the cab waiting, I refused to go inside. I got Dr. Malling to the entrance and told him, and then ran to the taxi. But he could run faster than me. He got into the cab with me. He went with me to the flat where I used to meet . . ."

"Isn't that enough?" Dr. Malling interrupted. "Two lives were at stake. In addition, it would have meant terrible tragedy to Mrs. Watson's family. How could I stand aside? And, of course, I had no reason to expect an emergency with any of the patients here."

"He talked to us, and talked to us, and talked to us," Mrs. Watson said. "I can't remember half he said, but after a while

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our relationship—between me and my lover, I mean—it didn't look beautiful, or even attractive any more. It just looked painful and ugly. Somehow, having us together, talking so sanely, Dr. Malling broke the fatal bond that had us enslaved. He . . . he got us to give him the poison. He took me home and I didn't even cry when I said a final goodbye to my lover."

"I was bound by a solemn vow that I'd never reveal what happened that night," Dr. Malling added. "Mrs. Watson has found happiness since then. I hope her action today won't spoil it."

"Perhaps," Dr. Brown said, rising, "I'd better drive Mrs. Watson home. We can go through the hospital to the garage, and she won't attract the attention of the Board members."

They went out. The others stood up. Tess stood up with them. She had said nothing, and had the feeling that she had been an interloper. Then one of the Medical Association officials turned to her and took her hand.

"We have you to thank, Nurse. If you hadn't acted as you did, I'm afraid we'd have made a very serious mistake."

He turned to Dr. Malling. "We'll have a few straight words to say to this Hospital Board, and a report will certainly go to the Hospitals Commission over this. Do you want your position here restored?"

"No," Dr. Malling said, "I've taken a partnership with Dr. Villers. All I want is the Association's co-operation in my neuro surgery."

"You'll certainly have that. Some of your recent cases have attracted attention overseas. Are you coming with us to tell the Board?"

"No, thanks, I don't find their company very inspiring," Dr. Malling smiled. "I'll drive Nurse Walden back to her duties."

They went to Dr. Malling's car. Tess got in beside him and said, "I'll be in trouble with Matron. I didn't take time to tell anyone where I was going."

"Absent from duty without explanation," Dr. Malling said. "But in this case we can reveal where you were."

"But not who I was with."

"I don't think there'll be a very big enquiry over it."

He was silent for a moment. Then he asked, "Were you very worried? Over this story about me going off to a flat with a woman?"

"Yes, I was terribly worried. It sounded so . . . so sordid."

"I was worried, too," he said. "About how it would seem to you."

Tess felt her heart thump hard. Then it seemed to stop

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beating. These were the first words he had spoken that indicated his concern over her opinion of him. He had touched her hand once in a way that conveyed an interest in her. He had given other indirect indications, but he had never said a word she could construe as a sign of love. She waited, hardly breathing, for him to say more.

He drove on in silence, and her heart sank. Despite the events of the morning, the heaviness of spirit pressed on her again. He had said these few words, then he seemed to regret them. Surely, she thought, if they had meant he loved her, he would have said more.

He took her arm as she got out of his car at the private hospital.

"You've been A.W.L. for over an hour," he said. "A little while longer won't matter."

He led her to his office and closed the door.

"I feel like a free man at last," he said. "While that affair hung over me I felt bound. I couldn't look ahead."

"It must have been terrible for you, but you didn't show it."

"I did show it. Perhaps not to others, but to myself. There were things I wanted to say to you, plans I wanted to make . . . Do you feel free now? Free from those emotional storms that used to bother you?"

He was so self-controlled. His eyes glowed as she had often seen them glow; his whole face was radiant, but he kept his voice calm, his body relaxed. Tess wondered if a man in love, really in love on a man-and-woman basis, could possibly remain so calm. She wondered if Dr. Malling thought a love affair should be conducted in this sober, unemotional way. She was sure she saw desire in his face, she herself waited for the gesture, the word that would take her to him, trembling, heart pounding, breath coming fast, in complete surrender. It was not evasion, it would not be retreat from a situation; it would be the facing of it, accepting it, seizing it with joy.

"Do you want the truth?" she asked.

"Yes," he whispered, letting emotion colour his manner at last. "Yes, the full truth."

"Then I'll tell you that I know I can control my emotions. I know I have learned to handle problems and not run away from them. But there are situations which you can't handle, and can't face, unless you bring all your emotions to them, and unloose them, and . . ."

"I should be telling you that," he said. "Is this the kind of situation you mean? This moment?"

Tess was looking into his face. She had no need to reply. She saw that this man, with all his knowledge of the physical

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springs of emotion, was yet very timid about his own; very afraid of making a false move and being rebuffed. But now he saw her answer in her eyes, and the glow that was on him flared into a great joy, and he came a little closer, then paused.

"Can it be true? I had almost lost hope," he said.

"It is true. It is the only truth I know," Tess whispered.

At last his arms enfolded her, and she lifted her face with calm radiance and his lips found her lips.

THE END

All characters in this story are imaginary, and any resemblance to real people, living or dead, is entirely coincidental; if any name used is that of a real person, living or dead, the use is inadvertent and is not intended to refer to such person.

DOCTOR IN DISGRACE

by

Shauna Marlowe

Gossip, rumours, and slander; Nurse Walden felt it all round her, heard it whispered behind her back, saw it in the eyes of the girls who used to be her friends.

A doctor was in disgrace, his right to practise threatened. A few words spoken thoughtlessly by Tess Walden were said to be the cause; and her friends became her enemies.

They said she had done it to please the man she loved; a man who had a grudge against the doctor. They said she did it to curry favour with her lover's wealthy family.

But the doctor said, "You mustn't blame yourself, Nurse." And he also said, "The love of a woman for a man is good, just as the love of a child for its mother is good. But, if you get the two kinds of love mixed up, it leads to tragedy."

Tess saw tragedy on every side. As her troubles mounted, the greatest tragedy seemed to be the disgrace of the doctor she had innocently ruined.

This is the story of how a nurse learned the hidden secrets of her nature; it is the story of high courage, and of devotion to a great purpose.